



fishladder

Spring 2022

A Student Journal
of Art and Writing

fishladder

fish • lad • der [noun]

A series of pools built like steps to enable fish to bypass waterfalls or dams.

There is a fish ladder on the west side of the Grand River that allows fish like salmon and steelhead to move upstream, past the Sixth Street dam, toward Lansing. The structure features a viewing deck for visitors to watch the fish travel upstream.

Students from across Grand Valley State University's campus are encouraged to submit work in all styles, genres, and forms. Please see the *fishladder* website for submission guidelines or to learn how to get involved with fishladder.

Website: www.gvsu.edu/writing/fishladder-96.htm

Facebook: www.facebook.com/fishladderjournal

Twitter: @gvfishladder

Front cover

"Eurydice's Road"

by **Brianna DeLange**

Back cover

"Maybe There Isn't a Meaning,
but Maybe There Is"

by **Madison Goetsch**

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of Art & Writing

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fishladder Staff

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Letter from the Editor

Last year, *fishladder* was made during the beginning, and what we had hoped to be, the middle of a pandemic. We thought it would soon be over. During that time we leaned heavily on art, and on creation—I know I did. It gave me something else to focus on, something else to do instead of dwelling on the uncertainty I was feeling.

The one thing I admire about creatives is our undying hope. We create because it makes us happy. It releases something trapped inside ourselves, thrumming against the bottom of our shoulder blades and beating on our rib cages. We create to share, and to not share. We create to reveal injustice, to call attention to those unheard. We create, to tell stories, both true and fiction, to play with language and crafted emotions. We dig our fingers into different mediums and spread our very hearts on the canvas. Even in our darkest times we find something worth continuing to create for.

To combine these beautiful submissions you are about to see into a physical book is to weave the soul of the creator into the binding.

Once again, this journal became a hiding place, a refuge, to share, discuss, and create. We are now living in permanent “unprecedented times,” and there seems to be no end in sight. My only hope moving forward is that more of these hiding places appear for us. That by creating we can heal and grieve together, and continue to forge hope for those who will come after us.

To those who helped create this wonderful journal this year, thank you from the bottom of my heart. To those whose work lives between these pages now, thank you for trusting us with your creations. To the reader, holding this in your hand, thank you for embarking on a journey made into a journal. I hope you find out something new about yourself, as I did.

From all of us to you, here is the 2022 edition of *fishladder*. Stay safe and enjoy.



Jenna Sobaski
fishladder Editor in Chief

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Grand Valley Ripples

Liv Chow

Love Letters to My Anxiety

Audrey Kelly

My beloved,

How lucky am I? How lucky that you are so endlessly devoted to me. I admire that about you, really. Your dedication is astounding. Despite those meds I was on for years and years, you decided to stick around. And if I tried again, if I admitted that maybe I'm not okay, would you stay?

With love,
Yours

My darling,

I have come to realize that maybe I don't know who I am without you defining me. You take up so much space inside of me, and though my chest expands with every breath it's still not enough room for you to fit comfortably. Instead, you're crammed between my ribs so tightly I'm afraid the beat beat beat of my heart is so fast it might break. But what if I yank you out like a parasite infecting its host? Will the hollow cavity left behind heal over time? Or are the walls too used to your shape? Too used to the space you carved out for yourself all those years ago. I don't know how to be me without you.

Uncertainly,
Yours

My dearest,

I suppose I have you to thank for my successes. I owe you for all the time I've spent trying just a little harder because maybe then I could finally be enough. Smash my fists against my limits until they fracture under my touch. When the world isn't handing out grades for hard work, who is going to validate me?

Wearily,
Yours

My shadow,

How kind of you to accompany me every time I leave the house. You whisper devilishly in my ear while I ponder about every passing face. What's their name? Where are they headed? What do they think of me? Is my outfit too eccentric? My hair out of place? You even tag along when I visit my friends—squeeze my hand when I wonder if this is pretending. No longer the imposter, I am the hardworking daughter, the loyal friend. And if we're pretending, then I can believe I'm not about to split at the seams until my stuffing comes loose.

Inseparably,
Yours

My tempest,

If I could drown in my own thoughts, I would be a dead woman walking. But maybe I already am.

Desperately,
Yours

My forever,

Here's a list of things you probably already know about me:

I love to write. Sometimes. I usually just say I'm "working on something." I don't like change. Despise it, actually.

I have an irrational fear of heights.

I have a rational fear of failure.

Always,

Yours

My unknown,

I wish I could see into the future. Strike a match and peer through the abyss at what's to come. Catch a glimpse of the monsters lurking there. If I worry about all the things I cannot see, does that make me wise or naive? What if the monsters aren't real?

But what if they are? I can't decide what's more frightening: the monster or the dark.

Naively,

Yours

My now but maybe not forever,

If I asked you to go, would you leave me alone? If I begged you for some space? Or would you stick around just like you always do, clinging tightly to my bones? Sometimes you can't kill off the parasite without killing off the host.

Until we meet again,

Yours

Inside the Box

Anna Evangelista

I speak.

But the words are stuck

until they are unjumbled and fall out, then

becoming rocks rolling down my tongue

in the space

they will not be understood

I think.

behind the redder side of flesh

all the stars of thought twinkle at once

no constellations to be seen

they spark under my shivery skin

as dazzlingly as expected.

I talk in my head.

I know.

Someone just as confused as I am answers

with no words

to keep my thoughts

needed

in their mind as a friend does

feelings are colors and smells are memories

it will make sense even if it doesn't

and that's only in the first light year.

Are You Happy?

Audrey Kelly

trigger warning: eating disorders

You devour the piece of cake, licking the frosting off the fork. The flavor is one you requested your mom make, and the frosting is homemade buttercream. Your friends gather around the table, digging into their own slices the moment you blow out the candles. Your mom always throws you an elaborate birthday party complete with themed decorations and games. And of course the cake. The cake she spent days baking lovingly just for you. All those hours of mixing and baking and frosting just to cut into its sugary core and feast until there's nothing but crumbs. But your friends are here, and you're happy. It doesn't matter that a birthday only lasts one day or that your friends will go home at the end of the night or that the cake is already gone.

You're happy.

You take a bite of the donut, cream spilling out the other end. You laugh and take another bite, the frosting so sweet it stings your tongue. Your grandpa brought a dozen donuts, no matter that most of them will be thrown away two days later when they're no longer fresh. And maybe you'll have two donuts. Who cares? It's Sunday and you really only see your grandpa then—when he unveils the mouth-watering box. You tuck one away for tomorrow. He stays long enough to drink his coffee and read the newspaper. Sometimes he does the crossword but never stays longer than that. He hates change (and so do you), and this is his ritual. Donuts on Sunday and chocolates on Valentine's Day and pies on Thanksgiving and Christmas and sweets just because he loves you. You eat them all, licking the frosting off your lips, because this is how he loves you. It doesn't matter that he won't come to any holidays your grandma is at or has never come to a concert or play.

You're happy.

You eat the pies and cakes and candies. You covet them.

Crave them. You eat when you're sad. You eat when you're bored. You eat just because you can. You watch your mom try a new diet until suddenly the woman who looks just like you and tells you to love yourself just the way you are wants more desperately than anything to change. And she's happy. She buys clothes just a little too small and counts her calories devoutly like they are her god. It doesn't matter that she says "I'm not going to eat that, but you can" or that everyone tells her how proud they are of her and how skinny and beautiful she is. It doesn't matter that your family asked if you were going on a diet, too. It doesn't matter that they told your mom that you looked better, asked if you lost weight. It doesn't matter.

She's happy.

Someone cuts into the cake, and you carefully watch everyone else take their piece. Take too much and you'll look greedy. You recall everything else you've eaten today and vow to eat less sugar tomorrow. You savor every bite, the frosting sweet on your tongue. You stare longingly at the remaining cake, desperate to taste just another bite of the buttercream. But you wait. Survey the room. Waiting to see if anyone else will partake in seconds. If they do, you get another slice. But just one more. Barely a sliver.

Are you happy?



Fallen

Jesse Sandoval

Return

Katherine Heil

A bird flew past the window today.
It flew lightly, silently.
Carefully.
I thought it was a little ghost
Floating through the snapdragons,
With how silent and straight it flew.
Like a little ghost,
But why was I thinking about little ghosts—
Now why was I—

There was a little white bird in the garden.
Our own silent symbol of peace.
And of course I waited for it to sing,
But it never did.
It never sang in that sweet little voice of its,
But of course it must sing,
Because I remember how it sang,
In those cold white mornings in the winter.
Do you?

There was a bird in the window this morning,
With these pure white feathers and these clear black eyes
And darling, it watched me so carefully.
I think I should name it.
Something like Peace, or Grace.
But there must be a hundred white birds
Named such foolish things;
Though of course I am a foolish sort.
I'm foolish because I want to name it
Harmony,

But I simply cannot think of why,
Why Harmony,

Why do I think of little white ghosts
When I try to name it Harmony.

Do you remember when we named her—
Because darling I am trying so very hard to recall—



The Lonely Beach

Olivia Hammelef

Some Rare Semblance

Jackson Hicks

Morning fresh, nearly dead.
Life begins its cycle, at the edge of
time. Comparing the natural with
man-made, the industrial time.
We are such curious creatures—Man.

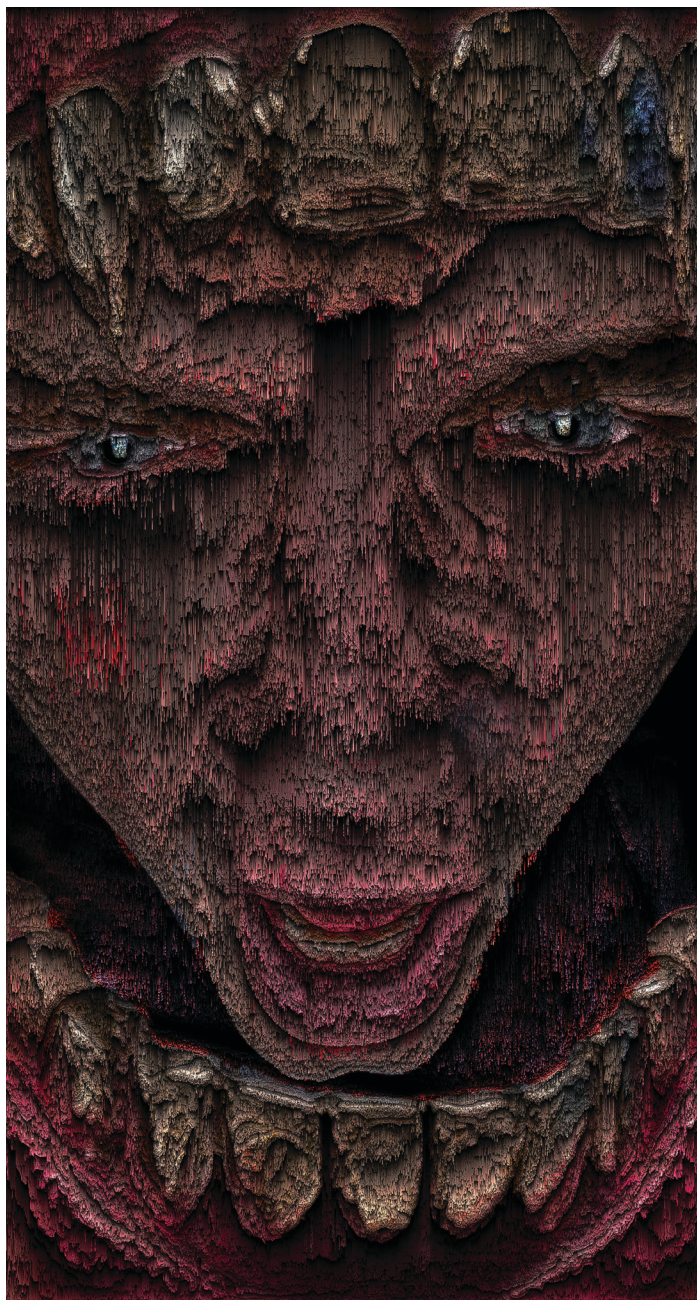
Do you imagine the birds worry?
Of the new sting in the air?
Does the bear know its old cough,
from this new one?
Rusted lungs.

A boy enters a new world
One where concrete paths are riverways,
empty Dorito bags and Starbucks cups
are Saplings, and the youth of the green.
Skyscrapers, Mountains.

Mark my words, seventy years time,
New York will be Atlantis.
The deserts' thirst will be quenched,
finally.

But it could be fixed, right?
The Boy in the mountains,
toils with nihilism.
Another man-made industry.

He could not save the planet alone.
This small, frail, little
creature.
A sapling.
Oh to be young, at the end.
The tragic joy in yielding the Earth's beauty
at its final cycle.



Rotten

Jeffrey Staub

A Voice Lives Inside Her Head

Cassie Kreft

trigger warning: anxiety and paranoia, resistance to help

Pssst, don't answer the door.
A world exists between its frame
where faux yet familiar faces dance and play tricks.
You must lock the locks
or the smiles, that say they know you,
will pry off the hinges and crawl through.
You're afraid of the dark,
the empty bed,
and the rooms upstairs
where your children once slept.
So you must sleep downstairs
where you'll know if a charred brick
is stolen in the night.
You know what no one else knows.
Water is poison, so don't drink it.
When you're starving,
the blue miracle liquid
feeds you the energy you crave.
Like your head,
your rooms are full of boxes
taped shut with
memories, loss, and worry.
You are alone in your crinkled skin.
You say your virus moves from cheek to cheek
but it's been gone for years now.
Everyone knows better than you.
They wear wigs,
they "play" dead
they steal and call it borrowing.
They are wrong.
You know better than them.
Medication is empty bottles of pointless pills.
If you swallow you will not do

what is best

for you.

The doctors, they lie.

They conspire with the familiar faces.

You don't know the familiar faces.

They pretend to know you but I know you.

I am you.



\$queaky \$unset

Jeffrey Staub

Jumbo-Sized Crayon Box

Isaac Haven

Your love is in your jumbo-sized crayon box, wedged
between your envy and another shade you forgot the name of, in
your toolbox that prepares you for any
outline that might need coloring in, and
you take care to make everything the right color, even if you don't
always stay within the lines

but you've left today's colors in your backpack, they've
melted,
re-hardened into an irredeemable lump,
and tossed around in your dreams all night

You cry in olive green and robin's egg blue, because
these aren't the kinds of colors you can buy at the corner store,
because your love isn't sharp and pristine, it's
dull, worn down to a stub and the label is peeled off, but
you still know exactly what color it is



A Raccoon's Nap with Eggs

Margie Griggs

The Bronco Diner

Madison Smith

It was 20 years ago when I first encountered the Bronco Diner. It was an old little building with paint in serious need of a redo and a roof that seemed to be missing a good chunk of its shingles. Yet, there were cars in the parking lot and that was good enough for me.

My then fiancé, Beth, and I were heading off on our road trip to Vegas when my 12 year old truck decided that she needed a break. We pulled over to get what we thought would be a sloppy, greasy, hearty, and quick meal. No one could have guessed what happened instead.

As we stepped inside from the pounding sun that shimmered off the desert like a sheet of bronze, we were surprised to see a much larger amount of people than what looks like would come from the number of cars in the lot. They were gathered at the counter and around the table, talking and laughing like they'd known each other their whole lives.

"Ok. This looks kinda cute. Doesn't give me serial killer vibes so that's good," Beth muttered from beside me.

"Hey y'all! Let me fetch you some menus. You can take a seat at any open table," called the waitress from behind the counter.

Before I even started looking for a table, Beth was already pulling my arm in the direction of a table against a back window so we wouldn't have the sun in our faces.

As I slid into the booth, I felt a tear from beneath me. I lifted my leg to see that the seat was already very well worn and had been ripped in several places before. I just made one tear a tad bigger.

Once we were settled in, the waitress came up to us with two laminated menus whose fabric sides, like the seats, were tearing at the seams. They probably hadn't gotten new menus in at least a decade or two.

"My name is Franny. I'm gonna be your waitress this evening. It's so nice to see new faces!"

Her bright blue eyeshadow had sprinkled onto her cheek and her eyeliner had given her some mild raccoon eyes, but she didn't seem to mind too much.

"Hi! I'm Beth and this is Jack," my fiancé said happily, as if we hadn't been in the car for 10 hours.

I, on the other hand, gave the waitress a tired smile.

"What can I get started for y'all? Something to drink?"

We order our usuals: water for me, Coke for Beth.

As quickly as she came, Franny was gone. I looked back down at my menu that was full of the usual suspects: burgers, sandwiches, a small portion for salads and fruit, and of course, dessert.

"Hey, do you remember that one restaurant we went to on our first date?"

I glanced up at Beth and couldn't help the laugh that came at the memory of showing up to what was supposed to be a fairly upscale place only to find it closed down and abandoned. I was so embarrassed, but she took it in stride and suggested we just get delivery and eat inside anyway. For the rest of the night, we pretended to be uppity servers and customers. I had never laughed so hard on a first date.

"How could I forget? I was pretty sure one of us was going to wind up with tetanus by the end of the night."

At her look, the strength of which diminished by the smile on her lips, I conceded.

"But it was quite the adventure." I took her hand from across the table. "It always is with you."

With a wink and a cheeky grin of my own, I brought her hand up to my lips and gave it a quick kiss next to her shining engagement ring. Her cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink and she rolled her eyes, trying to dismiss the smile that was so obviously crawling up her face.

"Can you believe we only met 6 months ago?"

"Aw! You lovebirds are adorable!"

The voice to my right startled me.

Franny had apparently returned with our drinks- one glass of water and a Coke in one of the old bottles that was blue instead of clear.

"Here you are! Have you settled on something to eat?"

It's a good thing that all diner menus look the same because that was a remarkably short time to let us pick what we want. But

maybe she already knew that.

"I'll have the classic cheeseburger. No onion. Plus mayo. Medium well."

I looked across the table at Beth so she'd give her order, but I was greeted with a very pointed look and a tap on my foot.

"Please."

Satisfied, she smiled up at the waitress and gave her order of a BLT without the T.

"Sure thing, sugar! It'll be up in just a sec."

Now left alone, I took a sip of my water and looked around the diner. I wouldn't say that it was dirty, but it was certainly old. Grime and dust had engrained itself into the wood of the tables, the metal of the counter, and windows along the walls. The paint on the walls was peeling and what I assume was once white then became a smoky yellow. The color clashed a bit with the rest of the red and black theme of the diner, but what are you gonna do? There wasn't another restaurant within 100 miles of here. I ran my finger along the table and observed it. At least the tables are clean.

"Hey." The voice snapped me out of my thoughts. I looked up to Beth, but she looked as though she'd startled as well.

"Hey newbie," the voice said again, but this time I could tell it was coming from behind me.

I turned around and immediately became within 5 inches of a very done up woman. Her make-up was much more put together than Franny's and she seemed to be wearing a party or a club dress. An odd choice of outfit for a random roadside diner, but to each their own.

Now that she knew she had our attention, the party lady spoke up again. "Who are you guys? Why are you here?"

"I'm Beth and this is Jack. We're just passing through on our road trip."

The other lady had now fully turned around in her booth.

"I'm Laura. Where ya heading on your little road trip?"

"Vegas!" Beth looked around before leaning in a stage-whispering, "We're eloping!"

"Oh my gosh," she squealed at an ear-piercing frequency. It was like something flipped and she was now as excited as a bubbly schoolgirl. "Congratulations!"

"Thank you!" Beth responded in the same pitch.

"So why are you eloping? Parents don't approve?"

Cheapskates?" She looked Beth up and down. "Surprise baby on the way?"

Beth shot me a quick look that I knew meant that she was taken aback, but she answered anyway. "None of the above. Both of our parents are dead and we already did a mini celebration with Jack 's friends back home. Figured we'd head to Vegas for the official thing and stay for the honeymoon."

"Cute!"

Beth looked at me with my back against the window, swiveling my head to watch the two of them. "Switch seats with me."

We did and instantly she and the other woman got to talking about weddings and marriage and whatnot.

Content to stay out of that conversation, I sat back and continued my assessment of the diner. From this angle, I could see behind the window that was between the counter and the kitchen. Standing at the grill was a scrawny man wearing a worn-out uniform and bandana covering his clearly greasy hair. He was dancing along to the Johnny Cash song playing softly overhead.

The man at the table next to us was having a less enjoyable time. Slouched over what I can only presume to be alcohol in a glass, his suit jacket was crumpled on the floor and his tie was haphazardly undone. He rubbed his hand over his unshaven chin and took a swig from his glass before slamming it back down beside the wedding ring on his table.

He kept mumbling something to himself, but between the smoker's rasp and distance, I could barely hear him. Slowly, I slid across the seat and could finally make out his words.

"Ed, why did you do this? Ed, why didn't you do that? Ed, stop being a dick. Ed, I hate you. Stupid wife. Stupid job. Stupid money."

After that, he took a substantially longer drink and finished off the glass. He raised it and gave the waitress a nod. Within a minute, she had come back with a new glass and took his old one away.

From the table behind my seat, but to my right from this angle, there was an elderly lady and gentleman talking with a little girl that I noticed was originally sitting at the counter. The couple had both clearly gone gray many years ago, but the woman still had her hair all done up and the man was slicked over.

I pretended to look at my phone, which had lost reception

ages ago, and leaned over so I could listen to their conversation. I couldn't get everything, but I could make out the old man, who had been referred to as Ron, explaining some very outdated relationship advice about getting a husband to make money and give her a family- everything she supposedly needs in life.

Thankfully that was undone- to an extent- by the woman, who the girl had called Kim, going on a tangent about her own children and daughter who never got married.

I peaked over my shoulder at the group.

The girl, Samantha as Kim had said, looked to be 12 at most and didn't seem to give one hoot about anything the older woman was saying. Her yellow church dress had splotches of ketchup on it and she had a death grip on the crayon she was holding as she colored on a paper placemat.

Nevertheless, Kim carried on talking and somewhere in all that, a picture fell on the floor in front of me. Facing back at me was an image of a group of young adults and kids donning some very colorful sweater vests. If the excessively large hair didn't date the photo, Kim's face hovering in the corner, staring off into the distance like a ghost, did it.

"Oh but look at my littlest granddaughter. She is just 4 months old. Born back in April. April 3, 1988 to be exact."

That caught my attention and I whipped my head away from the photo on the ground to look at her, even if she wasn't paying me any attention. That couldn't possibly be right. She'd be closer to 4 decades than 4 months. Maybe Kim just misspoke.

Before I could hear anymore, Franny was back with our food and Beth had turned back to face me again.

"One burger, no onion, plus mayo and one BLT with no tomato. Enjoy!"

I hadn't realized how hungry I was until I had a delectable meal sitting right in front of me. I grabbed the very full burger and took a huge bite out of it. Not even a minute later, Franny was back and asking how everything was. I finished swallowing my bite.

"Good. Little overdone, but I don't mind."

She nodded in understanding.

"Sorry 'bout that. Frank tends to overdo it a bit with the heat," she said, pointing back to the kitchen with her thumb.

"No worries. I'm so hungry, I would eat it even if it was completely burnt to a crisp."

I looked across to Beth, but she was so busy digging in that she just gave a thumbs up.

Satisfied, Franny left us to eat and eat we did. In a matter of 10 minutes, we had both completely cleared our plates. After I had eaten the last of my fries, I sat back and closed my eyes. I opened them again once I heard the scratch of a plate across the table. Beth had pushed her plate away and leaned back in her seat, staring up at the ceiling.

I reached across and grabbed her hand, interlocking our fingers on the table. For the next 10 minutes, we sat like that—hand in hand, digesting the delicious, albeit heavy, meal that we just ingested far too quickly.

Our spell of satiated peace was broken by the scream of a little girl. Having returned to her seat at the counter—where are her parents?—Samantha was screeching and pointing at something just to the left of her plate. Franny came rushing over to find a spider on the counter. The girl was in hysterics and before I could even react, Beth was up and walking over with a napkin from the dispenser. With ease, she killed the spider, wrapped it up in a napkin, threw it out, and was back in her seat before I could say ‘arachnophobia.’

Franny returned to our table and started taking our plates away. Beth and I were about ready to leave when she offered up a piece of pie to celebrate the wedding. Never ones to turn down dessert, we order a slice of pecan—our favorite.

“Good choice,” we heard, but it wasn’t from Franny. It was from a middle-aged man in sweatpants at the other end of the counter.

I glanced back up at our waitress and gave her a questioning look.

“That’s Pecan.”

“His name is Pecan?” Beth asked incredulously.

“No, but we don’t know his real name and he always gets the pecan pie so...” she trailed off, letting us put the pieces together.

Franny walked away to go get us our slice.

As we waited, the old man, Ron, had gotten to talking to the distraught man beside me—Ed, I believe. The older gentleman was going off about his “brand new Chevy Caprice.” However, according to Beth’s whispers across the table, his car was from ‘89 so there’s no way it was brand new, fresh off the lot.

Beth had always been good with cars. Within the entire 6

months of our relationship, she's had to fix my truck at least 3 times. Not to mention, she could give any car salesman a run for his money in terms of identifying make, model, and year.

I was about to tune him out when I heard him comment about my truck. Apparently, the name "Silverado" was foreign to him. Unless he's been living under a rock with no t.v. or commercials, I didn't know how he didn't know what a Silverado was. It's made by the same company as his car too.

It could just be a dumb thing, but for some reason, this had started itching at me.

I tried to think of the most logical explanations, but I couldn't ignore that in my gut, something was telling me that this was wrong. Something is off. I looked at Beth who wore a similarly perplexed look. Her fingers started tapping out broken chords on the tabletop- a typical habit of hers when she's stressed or frustrated.

We gave the couple a tense smile and turned back to our pie, trying to figure out what was going on. I was so lost in thought that I don't think I processed a single flavor of that dessert. Once that plate was cleared, I got a sense of relief that now we could leave.

I leaned across the table. "Ready to go?"

She met my eyes with both fear and certainty.

"Absolutely."

I pulled out my wallet and tossed a 20 on the table, certain it would cover the bill and the tip. I grabbed Beth's hand and we speed-walked to the door. I pushed it open, but then Beth's hand broke from mine.

"I forgot my purse!" she shouted while running back to the table.

I let the door close and started searching for my keys again. Then, from my side I heard a bang. Beth was at the door, pushing on the bar, but again it wouldn't budge.

"What the hell?!" She shouted.

I grabbed the handle, but this time it wouldn't move for me either. I tossed the keys into the dirt beside me and started pulling with both hands, digging my feet into the dirt for leverage. Beth was on the other side, pushing on all spots along the bar and door, but it wasn't moving an inch.

"You need to fix your door!" She shouted to anyone and no one.

After banging against the door several times and walking around the restaurant looking for a backdoor with no avail, she came back to the front.

Beth was now pacing, eyebrows scrunched, nose and cheeks red, and fingers playing soundless chords against her thigh. I rested my forehead against the door, trying to calm my rising heart rate.

"I could throw a rock through the window."

"Hey!" called Kim, whom I could hear through the glass. "Didn't your momma raise you better than to deface property?"

I sighed and looked back at Beth, deciding it wasn't worth it to fight with an old lady through a window while my fiancé is trapped in a building. My heel started tapping, my leg shaking.

"Sometimes it sticks. Come on. Have a seat. Eat another meal and try again later."

I jumped when I heard the voice that came from behind Beth. Franny was standing there with a chillingly calm expression.

"Yeah," Ed piped up. "Wouldn't work for me either. Sometimes you just gotta let things shift on their own."

A resounding "same here" came from around the room. When Beth turned back to me, her eyes were wide and she had the door in a death grip.

"I'm never going to leave. I need to get out of here!"

With that, she started yanking on the door, pushing and pulling it frantically like the bars on a prison cell, only to be stopped by a hand on her elbow. Franny had grabbed her and started dragging her back to our table.

"Stop. Stay awhile. Have a bite to eat," her voice terrifyingly still, her face neutral.

I ran to the side of the building again to meet Beth at the window. Franny had released her arm and Beth immediately jumped up again, only to be brought back down to her seat with Laura's hand on her shoulder. She slowly shook her head.

"Stay," she said with gritted teeth.

I could see my breath on the glass, coming and going in too short of spurts.

"I think," I looked up to meet Beth's eyes. "I think if I stay here, they won't hurt me."

"What are you—"

"I'll stay here and you go get help. Go to the police."

"No," I shook my head in disbelief. "I'm not leaving you here."

You," I quieted down. "You are not safe here."

"In this seat, I am. You want what's best for me, right?"

"Of course."

"Well you fruitlessly banging on a door that won't open isn't doing anything and isn't what's best for me. I'll be alright. I don't think anyone will do anything if I'm compliant. I'll just have another dessert or something. Try the cherry pie or something," she gave me a weak smile. "I'll be fine. I'm a big girl."

"No. At least let me try to call the police first."

She nodded.

I pulled out my phone, but of course it didn't have any bars. I still tried calling 9-1-1, but it just kept getting dropped or not going through.

"Didn't work, did it?"

Shaking my head, I replied, "No. I'm sorry."

"Then what are you waiting for? Go to the police." She gave me a shaky but bright smile. "You're wasting our honeymoon time."

I smiled back and put my hand against the glass where she met it.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you too."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw headlights approaching from down the highway. I started backing out toward the street.

"I'll leave my car here with you in case they let you leave. If they do, run and don't look back. The hotel's address is on the dashboard."

As much as it felt like my stomach was being torn in half and my panic levels were only rising, I knew I wasn't making any headway here. I needed real help.

I blew a kiss to Beth that she caught and held to her heart, then finally tore my gaze away and looked at the oncoming car, sticking my thumb out to the side.

Thankfully, as the car got nearer, it slowed down and came to a stop.

The older man in the driver's seat rolled down the passenger window.

"Need a ride?" He asked.

"Yes please. I just need to make it to the police station. I can pay."

He looked me up and down before finally settling on, "Alright.

But I don't do small talk."

"Fine by me," I said as I got in.

As we drove into town, the country music lightly playing in the background, I sent up a quick prayer of thanks and for help. My mind was still reeling from the alternate universe that I apparently stepped in. What the hell is going on?

Eventually, my mind got tired enough of trying to comprehend what had happened and let me sink back into my chair and listen to the music. Before I knew it, we were at the station address that I gave the driver from Google and I handed him two twenties before he drove off.

I walked inside and gave a shortened account of what had happened to the lady behind the receptionist desk, stating that I needed a police officer or someone's help. After a bundle of intro questions and paperwork, I was finally seated with a detective.

I explained everything that had happened last night from my truck calling it quits to the patrons and the food to Beth not being allowed to leave.

"And now I don't know if something happened to them there or if something was in the food that was causing a psychological reaction or maybe now she can come back but my truck wouldn't start anymore. Please Detective," I looked at his badge, "Steinfeld. You have to help me."

He looked down at his notes and then back up at me. "I'm sorry kid. I don't know if there's much we can do. It doesn't sound like any crime was actually committed. What diner did you say this was again?"

"The Bronco Diner. It was off of I-78."

Detective Steinfeld now just looked annoyed. "There's no Bronco Diner off of I-78."

"Yes there is. I-"

"Did you say the Bronco Diner?" came a gruff voice from my side.

I looked over to see another detective not so subtly eavesdropping.

"Yeah. We stopped there for dinner and now my fiancé can't leave."

The detective went quiet for a minute, looking down and scrunching his eyebrows together.

"Hey Danny," he called to another detective across the room. "Bronco Diner sound familiar to you?"

Danny walked over, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Yeah. That's the old folk tale. Rumor has it that there's this diner that randomly pops up out of nowhere off of 78 and to most people, it's a regular diner. They can come and go as they please. But if you're a criminal and are on the run from the law, it takes justice into its own hands, well, so to speak. It traps them there for eternity and they can never leave."

Despite the tightening knot in my stomach, I said, "Not only is that physically impossible, but Beth isn't a criminal so there would be no need to trap her. But it's still—"

A picture on the wall caught my attention. Franny. Our waitress. Her picture was hung up underneath a 'Wanted' label.

"She was there," I whispered. I got up to look more closely at it. Yep. It was definitely her.

"Francilla LeBlanc was at this diner?"

"Yeah," I turned back to him. "She was our waitress. What is she wanted for?"

"Drug possession with intent to distribute. Wanted since the 80s. Must look quite a bit older now, huh?"

No. She didn't. She still looked like she was in her 20s. But another picture just to the left of it now grabbed at my attention. "And him. Frank Jenkins. He was the cook."

The detective had now come to stand next to me. "Wanted for arson."

That explains the very well-done burger.

"Recognize any others?"

I stood back and looked at the wall.

"I recognize all of them."

Each and every one of those pictures was someone in the diner. I may not have met all the patrons, but these people were definitely all there.

I pointed at a picture of the couple. "Ron and Kim. I talked with them."

"Wanted for armed robbery. Last known act was robbing a car dealership and riding off with one of their new models."

I looked at him incredulously. These people? Armed robbery?

He just shrugged. "The people who knew them and turned them in said it was to 'spice up their sex life.' But that was 40 years ago and they were in their 60s even then. I'm impressed they're still alive."

I grimaced and turned back to the wall.

"There's Laura."

"Extortion. I hope you didn't tell her anything bad because she will dig around until she finds a juicy nugget of leverage and she will hold it over you until she gets what she wants."

"That's Pecan."

"Pecan? Is that what they're calling him? He's wanted for identity theft. Some say that he stole so many names that he forgot his own."

I shook my head, my brain reeling with all of this information. Had I just spent an hour in a diner full of criminals? Had I just left my fiancé in a diner full of criminals?

I pointed to the next one.

"That's Ed. Pretty mopey guy."

"Makes sense. He was running an embezzlement scheme after his wife left him and just got exposed right before he went on the run. But that was back in the 50s. Are you telling me that you're able to recognize this man, 70 years later? And he's alive too? What's in the criminal water these days?" He muttered, more to himself than to me.

"No, no. He looks exactly like he does in his picture. It is the same man. I swear on my life."

Steinfeld gave me a side-eye but I didn't let him ask me any more questions because I interrupted with, "That's Samantha. Seemed like a cute kid, but her parents were nowhere to be found."

"Well, that checks out seeing as she killed them."

If my head was reeling before, it was now blown to smithereens.

Steinfeld looked around before leaning in. "Not that I support or condone it, but I understand. During our investigation, we discovered that they had been highly abusive towards her. She's the most recent to go up on the board."

So those weren't ketchup stains on her dress... oh God. Where did I just leave her? Why did I just leave her?

"We need to get Beth out of there. She can't be alone with them."

I had now started to hyperventilate as my heart was pounding in my eyes.

"Ok, kid," he put his hands on my shoulders. "I'm not really sure what you thought you saw—" I almost interrupted but he continued. "But we'll at least check out this diner. We're gonna

get her and get them. We'll figure this out. Do you have a picture of Beth?"

"Yeah, I do."

I pulled out my phone and showed him my screensaver which was a picture of her one day when we were on the beach. I then brought up another picture of her smiling in a golden hour from the prior week. The officer took my phone and downloaded the image.

"Yeah, I do."

I pulled out my phone and showed him my screensaver which was a picture of her one day when we were on the beach.

Steinfeld looked at it, looked at me, then stepped back.

"This is Beth?"

I nodded but he shook his head.

"This isn't Beth. Unless she has a twin sister, this is Jessica Flores. Wanted for murder."

"No, no that can't be right. You're wrong."

"You said you two were engaged?"

"Yeah."

"What do you do?"

"Accountant."

"Good money?"

"Decent, yeah."

"Did you approach her or did she approach you?"

"She approached me. I remember I was hanging out at the bar with my friends and she just walked right up and introduced herself."

"And how long had you two been together?"

"6 months, but that was enough to know."

He looked at me with pity in his eyes. "That was her con. She would get with a guy, get married quickly via elopement, and then kill him for the life insurance money. I think you dodged a bullet, kid."

That's it. That's what broke my brain. For the next half an hour, I just sat in a chair, trying to figure out if the diner was real, if our relationship was real, and if it wasn't, how did I miss it.

That spell was broken when I felt Steinfeld's hand on my shoulder again.

"Hey. We're gonna need your help to find the diner. You're coming along for the ride."

Numbly, I nodded my head and let him put a bulletproof

vest on me. Together, we walked to one of the cop cars and I gave them instructions on how to get there from the best of my recollection.

We took off and within a half an hour, I spotted my truck.

"Here! Pull over here!"

Steinfeld did and before the car even fully stopped, I was out. I stood in front of the car and looked around. There were Beth and I's footprints walking from the car, but there was no Bronco Diner.

"No. No, no, no. It has to be here. I was here. I had dinner here. What is it?! Where is she?!" I was frantic and shouting into the wide expanse of the desert. "Beth! BETH! JESSICA! WHERE ARE YOU?"

I could feel the telling pricks behind my eyes as the wild emotions from the last 24 hours caught up with me. Suddenly exhausted and far too weak to stand, I collapsed onto the sand, ignoring the abundance of rocks digging into me. I looked in front of me where the diner should be, but there was nothing.

It was like it was never there at all.

For the next half an hour, I just sat on the ground, dirt and dust ingraining themselves into my pants as I was trying to figure out if the diner was real, if our relationship was real, and if it wasn't, how I missed it. I could tell that people were moving and talking around me, but their voices were garbled, as if they were all drowning in the tsunami that was wreaking havoc in my brain.

The pair of legs that appeared in front of me and tapped my foot brought me back enough to say, "So where is she?"

"We were just about to ask you the same thing," Steinfeld said.

"I wish I knew," I looked up from the dirt to meet his eyes. "I wish with everything in me that I knew where she was. Hell, I wish I had killed her just so I'd know where her body is. Just so I'd know her mind is at rest."

I shifted my gaze over to the empty patch of dirt that held no indication that anyone was ever there- no building marks, no other footprints or vehicle tracks. Not even a ring was left behind.

Now, 20 years later, as I drive down I-78 to Vegas with my wife of 10 years Flora in the passenger seat reading her book, I see a little run-down diner approaching on my right. In big letters, I can make out the words: "The Bronco Diner." The memories come flooding back and as they do, I floor the gas harder until it's safely in my rearview mirror.



Self Portrait

Esther Joy



Two Moths

Margie Griggs

Keegan Colcleasure

One, five, nine, two, five. I think of tonight's meal, a real meal, the first in at least a week.

One, five, nine, two, five. Nobody notices me anymore, and after some time on the street, the dirt acts as a cloak of invisibility. Nobody can see me because nobody wants to. Maybe it's the guilt of acknowledging my existence but being unwilling to help.

One, five, nine, two, five. Five numbers that played a brilliant melody on that keypad. I discovered my "method" frequently spending my nights lying outside apartment complexes' locked doors. Each button with its own unique sound to be learned and memorized. After sleeping near a keypad for a few days, I learn what each number sounds like.

One, five, nine, two, five. I would never do anything with these numbers or codes myself.

I'm not a crook. Yet, what business is it of mine what a crook does with a string of numbers, an address, a license plate? Well, I'd say it's not my business at all.

What is my business? Staying warm.

What is my business? Staying fed.

"One, five, nine, two, five. Apartment 12C, just down the block on the right," I say to the man hidden by his brown hood as he hands me fifty dollars.

The residents of 12C don't exist to me anymore than I do to them, but I am thankful, for their lack of sight is the reason I will stay warm and not starve tonight.

Pink

Esther Joy

i bleed pink
at least that's what it looks like
when i tip my head back under the water
and the color slides down my skin
pools at my feet

i bleed pink
leaving fuchsia fingerprints behind
like a thief sure to be caught
because she can't be bothered
to wear gloves

i bleed pink
i grow paler every day
a pastel ghost now haunts my home
unbothered by the loss
tomorrow she will bleed blue



Attach, Detach, Reattach

Madison Goetsch



Power Grab

Jeffrey Staub

On Playing Pretend

Emma Chapman

trigger warning : gore

And here you are again,
playing coroner
conducting an autopsy
to see if I'm damaged.

First you'll want to look for scars,
evidence of a kind of harm
only I could commit.
But I'm a master at hiding
the parts of myself
that I hate.

Next you'll examine my brain,
take the vibrating saw
cut a line across my temple
and pull out my brain,
all pink and fleshy and jello-like.
Ask it questions,
as if I'm not in control
of my thoughts,
of the things I say.
I'm always in control.

When that doesn't suffice,
you will take a scalpel
and cut a line from my chest to my stomach.
You'll pull out my organs,
and wish that you could crawl up into me.
You always said
I gave the best hugs.

But you are looking for my heart
wondering if it's kept a tally

of all the people who have hurt me.
It has.

My brain always forgives,
but my heart never forgets.

Dear lover, dear coroner
you won't find my cause of death
written into my body.

It's not that easy
you'll have to take the defibrillator,
electrocute me back into existence.

You'll have to breath for me,
blowing air into my mouth and then pushing it out of my lungs.
You'll have to reach up into heaven and coax me back and then
I'll tell you:

my pain will always be on my terms.



Cold Beach

Olivia Hammelef

They Go Left

Kelley Sommers

Once our group reached the top of the sand, most of my travel companions immediately went to the left. Our tour guide had pointed out how to get to the old light house for a photo op. I went right, however, eyes trained on the quieter, practically empty end of the beach. Tide was out, silver waves lapping lazily halfway up the wide stretch of beach. The water smelled of seaweed and left the sand looking like a mirror as it retreated slowly, reflecting both the jagged mountains in the distance and the fiery sunset above them. It was cold and the wind was vicious, but what else could be expected, sightseeing in early November?

The looming mountains didn't seem to get any closer no matter how far I walked in their direction. There was a dusting of snow beginning to stick to the very top peaks, making them look slate gray. At the base of the mountains, however, I could see even from this distance that green plant life still clung to the brown levels of the rock. It was like summer turning to fall turning to winter represented all on one paint-sample card. Another gust of wind hit me square in the chest, coming in from the sea and tasting like salt. Strands of my hair came loose from under my baseball cap. I laughed, surprised, as I caught my hat from being blown off of my head and down the damp beach.

My voice sounded extra loud in the relative silence around me. With most of our group out of earshot and the waves further out at sea, the quiet seemed unusual for a beach. But it wasn't eerie. It gave me the kind of comfortable peace I had been hoping to find on this trip. Maybe I had been questioning my decision to travel solo at dinner last night, watching the other tables talking and laughing together over their food. But it was in this moment that I realized the stillness was the only companion I needed.

Stillness, peaceful quiet, solitude—for the love of God, just shut up and be alone for a minute!—proved to be the message that I was supposed to be absorbing on this trip. The first morning

of our tour, leaving out of Dublin, in true Irish fall fashion, it was pouring rain. At seven in the morning, I was wearing completely the wrong coat and shoes, dragging my suitcase across the old cobblestone sidewalks around Trinity College. In equal measure, my thoughts were “please don’t break a wheel” and “why are there no coffee shops open right now?!” The city was practically silent, the damp throwing a shiny dark gray hue on buildings, sidewalks, dark shops. But it wasn’t eerie. Once I was certain that I wasn’t lost, I felt privileged to see such a city, with so much history, in this state. It was like being in an empty, ornate theater before anyone else arrived for the performance.

Our first stop once we were out of Dublin was Stephenstown Pond, once home to Scottish poet Robert Burns’ sister. There was a cute little coffee shop with a convenient parking lot for the bus. Our guide billed the visit mostly as a coffee stop, with a tidbit of history tacked on:

Robert Burns was close with his sister, he spent quite a bit of time here, they even called that cottage “Burns Cottage.”

Isn't that something, how interesting, it is very pretty here, can't blame him...Do you think they have sausage rolls in the shop? I'm starved.

Coffee never seems to taste better than on a morning when you can’t find any, in the rain. The warmth of that shop was like a wool blanket. It was the first hour of their day, we were their first customers, and somehow, that knowledge had us all hushed, as if entering a church. It was the epitome of cozy, and within the first ten minutes of a half hour stop, we all had our orders. What now?

Some went back to the bus, a few went left, over to the gift shop. I went right back out into the rain. Well, the drizzle, by that point. I wanted to see the actual pond of Stephenstown, and it was evident that it was a short walk down the drive.

My socks started to feel soggy inside my tennis shoes. My sweatshirt hood was sitting heavy on my head. The loose hair around my face was starting to curl from the moisture. The warmth of the coffee in my hand led the way. It’s too hot to drink yet anyways, so why not?

I reached the path and the drizzle turned to a mist, thanks to the canopy of trees. Everything was still alive here even though winter was coming soon—so green! Everywhere green! Overwhelmingly green! The Emerald Island living up to its name!

The stones and dirt of the path crunched under my feet, the earthy smell of soil mixing with the aroma of my Americano. There wasn't another soul out on the pond walk, so I could hear the light splashing of the ducks and swans swimming further out in the pond. There was a slow drip of water falling onto a wooden bench, perched just next to the bank, surrounded by way too much mud for me to attempt to get to.

The moss on the railing enclosing the raised observation deck was the same color as that sweater of yours that I loved—but no! That's not why I'm here, not for your kind of green. I'm here to be reminded how big the world is. How intense the wind can be, how salty the sea spray tastes, how easily I can read a map and find my own way. I'm here to watch the swans gracefully float by, surrounded by rain drop ripples, within still trees, with still thoughts. I stare at the clean paleness of the swan's feathers, shiny droplets of water casually rolling off them, as I stand on the wooden deck, soft and warped by time. I wonder if Robbie stood here...I don't have to go left with everyone else. I can go right.

Though going anywhere without you doesn't exactly feel *right*, just yet.

Who is that girl wandering around by herself? She really does like walking in the rain, doesn't she?



Glory

Jeffrey Staub

Memorial for a Blessing

Sarah Krishef

Unlike the “I-see-you” acronym for the Intensive Care Unit, the acronym for the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit is pronounced as its own word, “nick-you.” The practice of keeping premature babies alive in incubators started as a Coney Island sideshow attraction, but it wasn’t until the 1950s that specialized wings of hospitals emerged to care for at-risk infants. And in the 1970s, mothers and fathers were allowed to bond with their children – able to physically hold and care for them during this incredibly delicate stage of their lives. Into the 2020s, survival rates of premature children have continued to improve, right along with incubation technology and the presence of dedicated NICU wings in hospitals.

Also in the 1970s, as those hypothetical mothers and fathers were hugging their premature babies, a little girl named Marisa wanted to be a real mother very badly. She would gather up her dolls and ‘play mama’ with them, holding their hands and swinging them up on her hip. This desire stayed with her for years and years: through her high school days, her secondary education/theater degree, her marriage in 1989, her terms through a New York cantorial school ... Finally, she and my father arrived in Grand Rapids, Michigan. New York was no place for babies. But a parsonage home in a quasi-suburban neighborhood, just down the street from the synagogue where my dad would work as a rabbi for the next 26+ years, was perfect.

* * *

The synagogue where my dad works is called Congregation Ahavas Israel. It’s a fairly humble building that shares space with the All Souls Community Church on Sundays and the Children’s Workshop preschool during the week. It actually started as two synagogues over a hundred years ago. The Jewish population split due to religious differences, then re-merged in the 1930s due

to the Great Depression. Today, coincidentally, Ahavas is about to combine buildings with the reform synagogue a few streets over. History doing donuts.

For over a hundred years, Ahavas Israel has housed a group of people belonging to the conservative sect of the Jewish faith. Many of these Jews are buried at one of two Ahavas Israel cemeteries: one is a full burial ground, and the other is a small section of a nondenominational cemetery named Greenwood. My family knows many people who are buried in both places. To be more accurate: I would only recognize a few people, while my mom and dad probably recognize every gravestone added in the last twenty-five years.

Like Ahavas being renamed over the years, the hospital where my siblings and I were born has a long and changing history. It was called the Blodgett Memorial Medical Center in the 1990s. “Blodgett” sounds like a wet thing getting hit, and “Memorial” is not a great name for a place meant to usher in new life. It is called the Spectrum Health Blodgett Hospital today.

Spectrum Health boasts about its “Level 4 Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.” It’s one of the few places in the country to designate space for not just preemies but “micro-preemies,” or babies born less than two pounds. Certainly the technology in this hospital is more advanced than it was 30 years ago. I can’t imagine any place in 1996 using technology like “MedNow,” this app that gives parents a live feed of their children from anywhere. But this is what I’m more interested in—how have directly life-sustaining technologies like ventilators improved? Who knows how many lives could have been saved if preemie babies of the past had been born one, two decades later?

* * *

After she got pregnant, my mom’s babies were affectionately known as Baby A, Baby B, and Baby C. An important qualifier to my mom’s desire to have children is that she really wanted to have girl babies. Her own closest sibling was a brother seven years older than her, so she’d never exactly gotten that sisters-growing-up-together connection. How sweet would it be to have some girls close in age? The desire to have twins had also passed her mind, but she’d never actually thought it would happen.

During an ultrasound, Marisa found out that Babies B and C were both boys. Baby A was in an inconvenient position, so its gender remained a mystery until birth. She waited, brainstorming boy and girl names. She didn't actually wait for very long.

The babies' due date was sometime in October, I think. It's never been too important. Because these babies were born in July at 26 weeks and one day old. Thirteen years later, at their b'nai mitzvah, my mom would fondly recall that she could slip Dad's wedding ring around their wrists.

* * *

Rabbi David had only been in Grand Rapids for two years at this point, but over 150 people came to the funeral, just about every Jew in the city. "It was like Yom Kippur," my mom said—the most important High Holiday of the whole year. A reporter would later write an article about the event, titling it "Congregation Comforts Own."

Despite being so sick that she went in and out of the hospital with the IV still in her hand, Mom spoke at the funeral. She called her baby a teacher of love. This is how the actual birth went: Mom experienced light contractions, and her water broke a few days prior. She was given intravenous magnesium sulfate medication to prevent labor; the doctors' intention was to keep her on bed rest for the next 8 weeks. She had an allergic reaction to the medication and her lung collapsed. They moved on to a C-section.

Healthy multiples are delivered about a minute apart, but the urgency over the first baby's condition was such that it took thirteen minutes to get to the second. The first child weighed 1 pound, 5 ounces. The next two weighed 1 pound 10.5 ounces and 1 pound 11 ounces, respectively. They were born in A, B, C order. They were in such bad shape that Mom hardly had time to look at them before they were whisked to the NICU.

* * *

Before all of this, Mom had a plan to name the baby girl of her dreams Shira Anna. In line with Jewish tradition, the name comes from a deceased relative, my great-grandma Anna Selma. Both she and my mother were singers, and in Hebrew, Shira means

“song.”

As Marisa was lying there during the C-section, numb from the neck down, she said she saw Hebrew letters in front of her. Pei פ, Lamed ל, Alef א. They form the root for “miracle” or “wonder.” And so Baby C became Bracha Pela—a blessed miracle, a wonder. A very Jewish name, hard CH and all, but there would be no need to worry about a substitute teacher mispronouncing it in school.

The baby spent the night having her malformed lungs manually bagged by a team of nurses. The technical name of her condition was pulmonary hypoplasia, or abnormally developed alveoli in the lungs. I grew up assuming this was a direct result of her being so premature, since lung problems in preemies are fairly common, but it was actually more likely to be a birth defect.

Meanwhile, my brothers remained under close watch on ventilators. My mom was moved to the Surgical Intensive Care Unit (sick-you, this time), where the nurses brushed off her seemingly delusional requests for updates on the state of her premature set of triplets.

Hours passed and my dad returned with the news that Bracha wouldn’t survive past the afternoon. They made the decision to take her off the equipment and let her die peacefully in their arms. I’ve seen pictures of this moment, but the image my mom painted for me really sticks. A brick-red, thin-limbed baby, crying and waving her arms without making a sound.

* * *

I found a print copy of a long email my dad sent to his colleagues, detailing the times and events of that grueling few days. The subject line is “Birth and Death.”

“... At 10:00 [a.m.], we called the doctor in to pronounce her and take her away. Before Dr. Winslow put his stethoscope on her cold, slightly blue, chest, he warmed it up against his palm. This tiny act of chesed [lovingkindness], k’vod hab’riot [honor to God’s creatures], caused new tears to flow.”

Doesn’t it feel like cheating to take that quote? It’s such a Rabbi thing—such a Dad thing, really—to turn to Hebrew when English

words aren't enough.

Typically, in Jewish tradition, mourners would have taken turns shoveling dirt over the coffin, but with a grave so small I don't know who else would have gotten the opportunity. Bracha's grave is a simple granite marker built right into the ground, clean of grass, easy to step on. Without asking my parents to translate, I can read the first line of the Hebrew. It says: "Bracha Pela, daughter of David Yehudah and Miriam Rachel" [my parents' Hebrew names]. Of the couple of other words I recognize, I can see "life" and "comfort" and "return."

Like my mom, I'd always wanted a sister close to my age. Although, if Bracha had lived, there was a chance I would never have been born. Three babies is a lot to take care of, after all, and Mom would have gotten her baby girl.

* * *

Baby B and Baby C became twins Zachary and Solomon, my older brothers. They were in the NICU for a month before they could go home. My mom spent her afternoons in the NICU, helping where she could. My dad went every evening and some mornings too.

Three years passed and my mom became pregnant again through in vitro fertilization. This put her on track to have multiples again, and she ended up with twins. She didn't want to know the genders of the babies this time. She was too nervous. But one of the doctors slipped up, calling me "she." Mom was elated. I was finally here.

When Bracha was named, the name Shira Anna was left unused, as it would remain forever. My mom has never wanted me to feel like a replacement for Bracha Pela. It's still hard not to make the comparison, though—not when it seems that my older sister died so that I could live.

When I was little, I built up this image of Bracha in my head. To me she always appears as a little, thin, fair-skinned girl, with straight brown hair not reaching her shoulders. She is about three to six years old. She wears a sapphire-blue, gloriously sparkling ballerina tutu, the kind of tutu I always wanted except in "her" color (I always pictured her name in blue). She was on my mind on and off as a kid. I had this weird habit of spelling out her story in one breath every time I had to explain my family: "I have a twin,

and my older brothers are also twins, and they used to be triplets except my sister died when she was a baby 'cuz she couldn't breathe."

When my brothers turned twenty, I couldn't stop thinking about her grave. The time she had spent dead had far eclipsed the time she'd been alive. I'd stopped announcing her existence a long time ago, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I, as my mom's only daughter, was responsible for perpetuating her memory.

* * *

In October 2020, on Halloween weekend, the Ahavas Israel Cemetery was vandalized the same day that former president Trump visited the city. Six gravestones were marked with 'TRUMP' or 'MAGA' in bleeding red graffiti. When my mom texted me, the first thing she let me know was that Bracha's gravestone was untouched.

My heart had been upturned with grief. It was one thing to mourn in silence that the ripples of Bracha's life were cut so short and touched the lives of so few. The idea that there were people who would trample her grave without a thought was unbearable to me.

The perpetrators were never found, Trump is no longer president, and there is nothing more to be done.

Over two decades ago, one hundred and fifty people gathered at the Ahavas Israel cemetery to provide warmth and comfort to two parents in the lowest stratum of grief. An act of stupid, violent hatred will not mean more to me than this. Nor does it mean more than the generations of bittersweet, lost love expressed with each shovelful of dirt.



Wind-Up Down Under

Madison Goetsch

Nana

Gabrielle Trembley

There will be a space for you
on the day of my matrimony.
Your essence, invisible to us,
will fill the gap in the pew to my left
and permeate waves of tranquility through us all.

My mother, she will never
poise the same again.
A lady who values pristine posture
will tote her grief in a lump
right below her neck

she won't be the only one.

We will notice the discrepancies
within our traditional family cuisines.
The chicken almonidine, Hungarian kiffles,
apple pies, strawberry shortcake.
The magic touch will remain upon your fingertips,

unreachable to us.

The euphonies of Clair de Lune and Fur Elise
will reverberate through my meditations.
Your crumpled hands massaging the keys,
coaxing them out of their rest
to eliminate the darkness within us.

The birds will long to harmonize with you again.
Our conversations will grow dull
without your chirps and croons and hums.
We will keep your language of profanity
alive, say things like *sugar, sugar plum fairies, sugar dumplings*.
Sparkles of dust will dance off our lips

and that is how we know you are listening.

Four Phases of the Moon

Haylee Seefeld

The first time they met was completely coincidental.

The trip was supposed to be short, Sel told herself. Instead, it felt like an eternity to the wall separating the two sides of Earth. However, in her sixteen years of life, she had barely left her hometown. She gazed out at the quiet scenery, only illuminated by the occasional lamppost lining the street. The sky was pitch black, dotted with stars and the watchful eye of the moon. The landscape was a dull and barren wasteland. Not many plants could grow without sunlight. In her town, there were buildings, people, and technology that made up for the lack of nature. Here, there was nothing.

In fact, agriculture was exactly what this trip was for. Normally, her father would visit the border once a week with a crew that was in charge of receiving shipments of agriculture from the other side. In exchange, Sel's community provided large shipments of water so that the plants could grow.

Her father was dead. Her mother's words echoed in her head from a few months earlier, the day he did not come back: He went to the wall and did not return. Don't make the same mistakes he did. She still had no idea what she meant by that. She didn't want to go to the wall; she still felt too young and inexperienced, but the expeditions needed leaders, and Sel knew what paperwork needed to be done from helping her father with it at home for years. He had told her exactly what he did: ride the truck, instruct the team to exchange the resources, make sure everyone came back, return home with the paperwork that documented the exchange, which then was signed off and filed away.

It was easy enough, he had said.

The truck came to a halt, and Sel lurched forward in her seat. They had arrived. With a quick glance around, she realized that she was the only one with such a reaction. Now many pairs of eyes had settled on her. The men of the crew were stoic and stern, none showing any sign of emotion other than indifference.

She cleared her throat and stood. "In the place of my father, I will be collecting reports and receipts tonight," she said. She did her best to sound authoritative, but she knew her voice wavered. "You may proceed."

The men exited the truck, and Sel followed. Her eyes widened at the sight in front of her. The wall dividing the sunny side of the planet from the moonlit side stood miles high, blocking out any light that could creep over. Although the sky was lighter, and the stars were nothing but faint dots, the rays of sunlight couldn't reach the land here. She knew from her schooling that there were projectors set up at the top that cast out reflective rays to keep the light out, but they were too high up to see.

A small door was opened on the wall, allowing a small amount of sunlight to seep through. Her eyes widened; it was so bright, even just that tiny sliver. There was a short period of conversation between the crew and the hooded figures that stood on the other side of the door. A few stepped through, and Sel realized that they wore the hoods and thick coats because they were not used to the cold temperature of her home. She almost laughed when one of them shivered.

She watched intently as the men got to work opening a large gate that blended into the wall so well that she had not noticed it. Harsh sunlight nearly blinded her, and she had to turn away and cover her eyes.

Someone stifled a laugh beside her. She carefully looked up, keeping her gaze as far away from the door as possible. One of the hooded figures stood a few feet from her, arms crossed over their chest. "Is this your first time here?" They asked.

Sel nodded.

"You don't talk much either? Man, I was hoping new blood would be more interesting."

Cocking her head in confusion, Sel turned her attention fully to the figure in front of her.

"Every Lunarian that comes here is quiet and serious. I saw you smile earlier. What gives?"

"We're told to get our work done as quickly and efficiently as possible. Casual conversation is not necessary for that," Sel explained. "So, what exactly are you accomplishing right now?"

The figure laughed again, tilting their head so that Sel caught a brief glimpse of a gap-toothed grin and red-painted lips beneath their hood. "You're a feisty one. I like that. I'm Leona." She

held out a hand in introduction. "You are?"

Sel turned back to the truck. "I am not allowed to make acquaintance with Solarians. Don't you have a similar rule?"

Leona pushed her hand up and tossed her hood back to reveal messy blonde hair and emerald eyes. "Perhaps. I think it is a stupid rule. Just cause one of us is used to the sun and one is used to the moon, it shouldn't stop us from talking. It's not our fault the Earth doesn't turn."

That earned a small smile from the Lunarian girl. "I suppose you have a point. In all seriousness, though, don't you have work to be doing?"

"No, I'm still in training. Right now, my only job is to observe. Would you like to observe with me?" Leona sat on the back edge of Sel's truck, crossing her legs beneath her. Sel nodded and sat down beside her. Her eyes began to adjust to the sunlight, allowing her to focus on the gate.

They watched as trucks were swapped at the gate, each holding valuable resources. Trucks from the sunny side carried food in hundreds of crates, and trucks from the dark sider were filled with huge tanks of water. A moment later, a stack of papers was slammed onto Sel's lap. A gruff-looking man stepped past her, motioning that it was time to go. Leona jumped off the truck, pulling her hood back up over her head as the man shot her a glare.

She stopped suddenly, turning back as Sel began to close up the back of the truck. "Wait, you never told me your name!" She called after her.

She hesitated—the secretive nature of Lunarians was burned into her mind—but the sound of the trucks pulling away forced her to make a choice. "It's Selena!" She called back.

"Do you have a piece of paper?" She asked.

Sel grabbed a blank sheet from a clipboard and a pen and strolled over to her. "Here."

Leona wrote something down, folded it up, and put it in the pocket of Sel's jumpsuit. "Read that later," she whispered with a wink, before quickly turning and sprinting through the gate as it closed.

Sel felt her face heat up and she felt frozen in place. Realization struck her; she had never seen a Solarian before, much less talked to one. They were far more friendly and talkative than the average Lunarian.

At least, Leona was.

The truck honked, and she was snapped out of her thoughts. With one last glance at the gate, she climbed into her seat, slipping on a pair of wire-rimmed glasses as she began to sort through the stack of paperwork.

On the other side of the gate, Leona stopped to look back as the wall was closed up. She smiled as she removed her jacket. Thanks to the sun's warmth, she did not need it anymore.

"Are you coming?" Someone called from one of the trucks.

"I'll walk back," Leona called back. "It's good exercise!"

The trucks drove off, and Leona wandered back to the wall. In Solaria, the rules were much more lenient than they were in Lunaris. Anyone could come to the border as long as they did not tamper with any of the security or try to cross. She was no expert on Lunarian law, but she assumed it was much stricter. She had heard rumors that no one was allowed within two miles of the wall unless they had government permission.

The explanation for these rules always eluded Leona. Perhaps, they were kept like that so that people would always be there to work on both sides of the wall. Why did they have the wall at all? Leona was told that it was because the climate would be thrown off: the water would dry up in the Lunarian towns close to the border, and it would be too much work to travel to where it was completely dark to find more. She wondered if Selena knew more. After all, she did want to know. She had never been able to speak to a Lunarian in the same way that Selena spoke. She clearly hadn't gone through years of experience like the other workers—she was too nervous and too friendly all at the same time.

Leona had spent much of her life exploring the border from her own side, and she knew every inch of the base of the wall in miles both directions. The security system had some flaws, and it was not impossible to get past it. Leona had done it once, a few years ago. There was a door that had a broken lock, and it led to the inside of the wall, a place filled with pipes, wiring, and cobwebs. It was not meant to be traveled through, but Leona found a pipe that led to a dried lake on the Lunaris side. With some brute force, the grate blocking off the pipe could be kicked down.

She hoped that this was still the case.

* * *

The second time they met was intentional.

Upon arriving home and closing herself in her bedroom, Sel fished out and unfolded the note in her pocket. Selena, it read, Wanna see my side of the world? I'll meet you at the wall at 4.00 tomorrow. Stay safe!

Her father used to tell her elaborate tales about the so-called "sun ones" and their world. Thousands of years ago, they built up civilizations in the habitable zone – the strip of land spanning dozens of miles beyond the border, where it wasn't hit by the direct, burning heat of sun, but still bright enough for plants to grow – where they grew every type of food imaginable under the warmth of the sun. They built the wall to keep the cold out, so that the plants could grow, and so that the water would not dry up on the other side. He had woven images of lush green fields that stretched for miles, of big white houses with vines growing up the sides, of people with tanned skin and golden hair bleached by the sun.

However, he warned her of the dangers of crossing the wall. If one crosses and sees the beauty of the sun, then everyone will, and no one will want to return. No one wants to work on the cold side, no matter how much they are paid. Although the sun ones are generous with their resources, they keep us over here for a reason. Without the wall, we'll be forced into the wastelands to get water. It's just how it is. Sel never knew what to make of this. If they were so kind and generous, why force people to live in total darkness and freezing temperatures just so they could have water? Why wasn't there a better way?

She asked, once, how he knew all this. He responded with a wink: I've seen it for myself. Don't tell anyone; it's our secret.

Despite the warnings, Sel wanted to see it for herself.

So, of course, in the early hours of the morning, Sel found herself opening her bedroom window and climbing outside. The town was quiet, as it was supposed to be during designated sleeping hours. Cameras and alarm systems on each street corner made sure this rule was enforced. Luckily for her, this was not the first time Sel had been out when she was not supposed to be. She had learned what roads had the least security and what buildings she could hide behind to keep her out of sight. However, she had never left the town on her own. Just in case, she had pulled a black coat over her gray dress. It was not exactly high fashion, but it served its purpose and would blend in with the

rocky landscape.

The walk to the wall was far from short, so she left nearly two hours before the time that she was supposed to be there. The walk through the town was easier, but Sel felt her heartbeat quicken as she neared the edge of town. In the wasteland, there were fewer places to hide. She also did not know what the security would be like at the wall; she had not gotten a good look at it during the short time she had spent there.

To her surprise, she felt oddly at ease as she walked. There was nothing out there, and it was strangely calming. She glanced at her watch and breathed a sigh of relief; she was making great time. The road was rocky, much more so than she had gathered from the truck ride. Her boots caught on the rough terrain, and she stumbled every now and then as she walked. When a car drove past, likely a security vehicle, she ducked behind a large rock.

She waited in silence until the headlights were gone, and the engine roar faded into the distance. Her hands gripped the fabric of her jacket, pulling it tighter around herself. It was freezing, far colder than it was in the town, where the buildings gave off artificial heat. She hadn't noticed just how cold it really was when she was protected by the walls of the truck earlier. Perhaps, this was a mistake after all.

I've made it this far; no point in turning back now, she reasoned as she continued down the road.

As she neared the wall, the air grew warmer. She loosened her grip on her jacket. When the men standing guard at the wall came into view, she turned sharply to the left and walked parallel to it until she found an unguarded spot.

A quick glance at her watch told her that she still had at least fifteen minutes to wait. She sat beside a deep groove in the terrain; it kept her mostly out of view in case a guard happened to come this way, but she could still peek over the ridge to see if anyone was coming.

It was a mere ten minutes before she felt a tap on her shoulder, and she let out a shriek. Someone's hand clamped over her mouth in an instant. "Hush," whispered Leona's familiar voice. "Do you want us to get caught?"

Sel shook her head, and Leona released her. "This way," Leona said, motioning for Sel to follow. She did, wordlessly.

They came to a broken grate in the wall, which Leona ducked

through effortlessly. Sel tentatively gripped the cold stone as she climbed into the opening. Her dress caught on the broken grate, and she scowled. Leona chuckled. "Careful, there," she said, reaching down to untangle the fabric. Her hand brushed against Sel's wrist, and she shuddered at the warmth.

"You okay?" Leona asked.

Sel nodded, smoothing out her dress.

"Good. There's a door about half a mile down with a broken lock. That's how I got in," Leona explained. "Hope you don't mind walking."

Leona spun on her heel and began down the dark passageway. Sel followed, taking in what little of the surroundings she could see. It was all concrete, except for the wiring pinned to the walls. Dim lights flickered from electrical boxes. Cobwebs caught in her hair, and the ground was wet, creating echoing splashes with each footstep. "I wasn't sure you'd actually come," Leona finally said.

Sel quirked an eyebrow. "Why?"

"You didn't seem like the type to break the law."

Sel's eyes narrowed as she felt her shoulders tense. Her voice never wavered, but Leona could sense the bite behind her next words. "What exactly does that mean?"

Leona held up her hands in surprise. "Woah, no need to get so defensive. It was just an observation."

"I only came because I want to see what the other side looks like. Then, I'm going home and pretending that this never happened, alright?"

Leona stopped in her tracks, and for a moment, Sel worried that she was angry. Then, Sel could swear she saw disappointment in Leona's eyes. "Do you like your home?" Leona asked.

"I..." Sel struggled for words, choosing her next ones carefully. "I like the moon. I don't mind the cold, and the darkness, but I also love the stars."

"The stars are beautiful," Leona agreed. "I've seen them when I've snuck through the wall before. It's like a million little suns."

A million suns, huh? Sel thought. Too bad they can't make plants grow.

"We're here," Leona said, and Sel snapped out of her racing thoughts. Leona reached for the door handle, before pausing. She turned to look Sel in the eye, and then removed her sunhat.

"Tuck your hair up into this," she said, handing Sel the hat. "You'll already stand out like a sore thumb, so this should help a bit. We don't want to cause suspicion. Also, lose the jacket."

Sel retrieved an elastic from her pocket, pulled her dark hair into a loose bun, and set the hat over it, and then tied her jacket around her waist. Leona nodded and pushed open the door.

Blinded by the light, Sel stumbled back. Leona caught her by the waist as her shoe slipped on the wet concrete. A fierce blush spread across her cheeks when Leona froze, still gripping the smaller girl's waist in a tight embrace, faces mere inches from each other.

"You're freezing," Leona stammered, nearly dropping Sel to the ground as she abruptly jerked her arm back. "Let's go."

Sel stepped through the door first. The sun was still blinding, and she squinted, using the brim of the hat to block the light. It sat low and stationary in the blue sky, casting burning hot rays of light across the sandy ground. The air was warm, hotter than it had ever been in Lunaris. She reached her arm out, goosebumps forming when the sun hit her pale skin. It hurt, and yet she couldn't bring herself to duck back into the shadows. She knelt down and traced her hand through the hot sand, letting it run between her fingers.

After quickly scanning the area for anyone who might see them, Leona set her gaze on Sel, studying those wide grey eyes that stared at the sand in wonder. Leona watched her lips twitch and curl into a small smile, breaking the stoic look that had graced her face since they met. Sel's face heated up, and she knew it wasn't just the sun.

Leona quickly shook her head, biting her lip and turning to look off into the distance. "Come on," she finally said. "You haven't even seen grass yet." She gave a lopsided smile.

Sel was grateful that she had someone to show her the best views. They had climbed to the top of a hill that looked out over the nearest Solarian city. It was just how she had pictured it in her father's stories. There were long rows of white buildings, lined by lush gardens. People with sun-bleached hair walked the winding streets, where children ran and played.

Leona was pointing out different landmarks to her, but the words fell on distracted ears. Sel was listening to the wind, the way it hissed through the tall grass and whistled through the leaves of trees on the edges of the city. She sat down on the

lush surface. The heat was becoming a bit much for her, and the ground, shaded by the tall grass, was a cool relief.

A moment later, Leona joined her in the field. The breeze ruffled her short hair, and she pushed the loose strands from her eyes with one hand. "What do you think?" She asked.

"I love it," Sel breathed, grinning up at the sky. "It's beautiful and so, so warm." She rolled onto her stomach, the hat falling from her head and landing beside her on the grass. "It's just like how I pictured it."

A blonde eyebrow raised. "I'm surprised that they told you about it. I've heard that they don't tell Lunarian children about it in schools so that they don't try to come over here and get in trouble."

Sel shook her head. "My father taught me. He said he saw it once."

"I'm surprised he lived to tell the tale," Leona chuckles.

Upon receiving no response, Leona turned her attention from the sky to Sel, who was staring intently at the grass beneath her, twisting a blade between her fingers.

"Selena?" She asked.

"He's dead," Sel blurted out, her voice cracking. She took a deep breath before continuing, "He used to do deliveries. Then, one day, he went to the wall and didn't come back. We got a letter in the mail saying that there was an accident, but they didn't give any specifics."

Leona's hands balled into fists. "Accident? No way."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you really not know?" A hint of anger dripped from her words. "I've watched someone get dragged away in handcuffs by a Lunarian guard because they took one step through the gate. I wouldn't put it past them to take it too far."

Sel narrowed her eyes. "Are you suggesting he was murdered?" She snapped.

"No." Leona got to her feet. "I'm saying your people have outrageous rules to follow, and I wouldn't put it past one of the guards to..." She motioned a hand across her throat. Sel swallowed thickly, but no words came for a few minutes.

"I know," Sel finally said, her voice heavy with grief. "It's not like I haven't thought about it. I just don't want to believe it."

"I think we should talk about something else," Leona said. "I shouldn't have brought that up like that. Sorry."

An unsteady silence settled in the air.

"I'd like to see the moon," Leona continued. "I mean, I've seen it before, but only at the border. I've heard it so much better when you get further into the dark."

When Sel didn't respond, Leona got to her feet.

"We should get you home," Leona finally said in a hushed voice.

They made their way slowly back to the wall. Despite the tension, Sel couldn't stop pausing in her tracks to look at various plants. Leona found it amusing. When they reached the door at the wall, Leona turned to go, but Sel grabbed her hand.

"I want to do this again," Sel said.

"I thought you were mad."

"I was just thinking." Sel spoke slowing, as if she didn't want to say the wrong thing. "There's a lot we don't know about where we both come from. I want you to see how I live."

Leona smiled. "Sure. Same time tomorrow?"

Sel nodded, closing the door behind her, and the light of the sun was gone.

The third time they met was a disaster.

Sel returned home safely, and she followed the same route the next night. However, she did not expect to see the number of guards at the wall to be doubled, nor did she expect to find Leona chained to the wall near the grate that they had gone through last time. She stood stock-still, head tilted down and hair obscuring her face.

"Leona!" Sel cried, breaking into a sprint.

Leona's head jerked up. "Don't—" She began, her voice a frantic yelp, but the words died on her lips when two figures jumped out from behind nearby rocks, pinning Sel's arms behind her back.

"Don't move, kid." Sel looked up at the masked face of a border guard. Something was different about this guard. She glanced around quickly, and she realized that the uniforms they wore were both Solarian and Lunarian. Since when did Solarian guards come over here? "You and your friend are in a lot of trouble," he continued.

Everything began to blur together as her heart raced—she kept her eyes firmly locked on Leona rather than her surroundings—until Sel found herself against the wall of the holding cell, hugging her knees to her chest. Leona leaned

against the metal door, occasionally muttering something under her breath or kicking at the door in frustration. Sel's mother had come by earlier, attempting to work something out, but her words fell on deaf ears.

"I'm sorry," Leona finally broke the silence between them. "I really didn't think we'd get caught."

"I know," Sel murmured dejectedly.

"I didn't expect my own people to turn on me."

Sel realized she was talking about the guards from earlier. "Maybe they're not as lenient as you thought. Maybe my dad was right; Solarians are the ones who put the rules in place, and it wasn't a universal choice. Maybe the Lunarian guards are forced to be there, to uphold these rules, or risk their own lives. Maybe they didn't care when you were alone and breaking the rules, but now that I'm involved—" She bit her lip. She hadn't meant to say all that out loud.

Leona's silence said everything. Her usual optimism shattered before Sel's eyes. Finally, she spoke, barely audible. "My own parents didn't even bother to show up here today when they were told what happened." She tilted her head against the wall. "I don't know what to think anymore."

Leona shook her head and forced a smile. "No use dwelling on it, though." Squatting in front of her, Leona placed a hand on Sel's knee. "We're going to get out of this, okay?"

Sel brushed her hand away. "It's not okay," She whispered, tears welling in her eyes. "Nothing about this is okay." Everything from the past few hours was fuzzy; she barely remembered the ride there, she could not remember the faces of any of the people who talked to her, and the future was bleak. She hid her face in her hands again.

Leona closed her eyes and sat beside her.

"I liked seeing the sun," Sel murmured into her hands. "I don't regret what I did, but I'm still not okay."

A hand settled on her back, and this time, Sel did not push it away.

The fourth time they met was in exile.

Sel knew her fate before anyone told her. Unless she was executed on site, the punishment for trespassing over the wall was banishment. She sat quietly in the back of a truck, hands cuffed and a blindfold over her eyes. It had to have been hours

by now. She was alone in the truck, except for the driver. A tiny part of her hoped that it meant that Leona got to go home, but the pit in her stomach said otherwise.

When she was pushed roughly out of the truck, the cuffs were removed, and she reached to take the blindfold off as the truck zoomed into the distance. It was pitch black, despite the dim light from the stars, but she could faintly make out the truck's lights in the distance. In a last-ditch effort, she raced after it, tears stinging her eyes. She ran even when she could not see the truck anymore, even when her legs ached, and even when her lungs cried for air. The hills made it impossible to know if she was even going in a straight line, and she had to be hundreds of miles from civilization even if she was going in the right direction, but she could not bring herself to slow down.

She only stopped when her boot caught on a stone and she tumbled to the ground, scraping her knees on rocks and dirt, tearing her jeans. She slammed her fist into the ground, curling helplessly into a ball. The freezing air nipped at her face and her hands and seeped in through her thin coat.

The wastelands were a deep fear instilled in her as a child. It was the areas of Earth that were uninhabitable, either too cold or too hot to sustain any form of life. It was not uncommon to jokingly threaten kids that they would be sent to the wastelands when they misbehaved. Now that the reality was setting in, those long-forgotten fears crept up, gripping her with icy hands.

She was so, so cold.

Slowly and shakily, she rose to her feet. She would freeze if she stayed in place. Not that it wasn't inevitable, but she shoved those thoughts aside.

Then, in the distance, there was a shout. "Selena!"

Sel strained her eyes in the darkness. She was unable to make out anything of substance, but quick footsteps echoed in the silence. Then, arms flung around her shoulders, holding her in a bone-crushing embrace. Blonde hair tickled her neck.

"Hey," Sel whispered, unsure of what to say.

Leona's embrace loosened enough so that Sel could tilt her head up. "Hey," Leona responded.

Sel rested her forehead on Leona's shoulder, wrapping her arms snug around her waist. "You're warm," she breathed.

Leona just nodded, burying her own face into Sel's thick hair.

"What do we do now?" Sel said, muffled by Leona's shoulder.

"We walk," Leona said. She lowered her arms, slowly taking a step back. "We walk, until we find a new town. We're not going to give up out here, alright?" She forced a smile, despite the waver in her voice and her shivering frame.

Despite everything, Sel laughed. She laughed hard, until new tears ran down her face.

"What's so funny?"

Sel wiped her eyes. "I just don't get it. I don't understand how you don't just accept things. You always think of something to do, some way to look on the bright side, some solution to everything. I've only known you a couple days, and yet you never want to leave me behind. I don't understand you at all, and yet I keep finding myself trusting you."

This time, Leona chuckled.

Sel reached for her hand, squeezing it gently. She was finally starting to think straight again. "Okay. We can follow the stars, so we know what direction we're going."

Leona gazed upwards, studying the millions of lights that illuminated the space. Despite the darkness, the sky was alive. "They really are beautiful. It's so clear out here."

A million suns. Leona's comment echoed in the back of Sel's mind. She flexed her fingers, warmed by Leona's hand in her own. Sure, the heat did not come from the stars, but as she watched Leona stare in wonder at the sky, a warmth grew inside her.

She wasn't so cold anymore.



Pixel Plane

Jeffrey Staub

If You Give an Insomniac a Cookie

Chiara Nicholas

When you were the insomniac,
thoughts churning through your head like butter,
I wanted to melt them into cookies
hide the cookie jar, no,
smash it,
White porcelain and all on concrete steps
graveled, blackened, not smooth
like the most minuscule of chocolate chips
that hit the pan just right
Searing deep into sheet metal to hold all that butter
weight, crumbly flesh and flaking bone

And might I ask for a glass of milk with that too
... to help you sleep of course.

How to Cope with Funerals

Chiara Nicholas

When my grandfather passed away
just days before my sister's 16th birthday,
I told her that he would hear her prayers from back home,
but the dead do not speak the words of mortals anymore
and prayers are what let him find peace in the first place.

It was more a prayer for her
to feel a part of things even though she was left
back home studying for midterm exams while we studied
the artifacts
of my grandfather's life in their country home nestled in
the crook of Michigan's thumb.
She came the next day for the funeral ceremony itself
accompanied by my mother's parents~both alive,
warm bodies: shared a heartache with my widowed
grandmother,
a tender hug, messy, like guilt mixed with honey.

I remember looking at my sister and father in parallel,
eyes like a water glass filled to the brim, teetering on uneven
gravel.

My gaze focused on my father, wondering
if he learned this from his own watching of his quiet father.

As I paced between casket viewing and the line of chairs
at the far corner, my mother, hovering
between all these many things and people
and the first body~direct bloodline severed,
I realized that this was a first for many things;

I had never seen my father cry before.

Mercy

Chiara Nicholas

A bird hit the glass pane of my fishbowl
house one morning, several summers
ago. I retrieved its soft body with gingerly care
the way one would cradle a chiffon
wedding veil,
so afraid it might cling to fingernail and tear.

I knew the sharp thump of its impact
meant nothing good for its fragile
ribs, tiny heart broken, yet
still beating. I was unsure
how to help it, did not know how
to push enough air back into its lungs.

My dad took out a shovel, scooped up the bird,
went to the side of the house and came back,
told me he laid the bird to rest on a bed
of wilted lily bouquets.
I pretended not to notice the dirt smudged
on his wedding ring.

All he said was that the bird was gone,
out of its misery. Sometimes there is humanity
in killing things and you have to know
when to let go of the things already gone.

2020 as a Psychological Thriller

Chiara Nicholas

Lighting a candle last night
I thought, just for a flicker of a moment,
how interesting it might be to watch
it burn out of control,
to give it the awesome level of control in my uncontrol.
I would love to light the whole room ablaze.

I am so sick of the life that is this year,
I want to peel it from my body like gristle
Strip clean and trim the sagging flesh,
throw it out, grind it up in the disposal
or let it burn, let the acrid hair and charcoal flesh scent the air.

I walk around my living room naked,
just to shed off something from my hunchbacked shoulders.
Everything is too heavy,
too damn claustrophobic,
even silk bras and cotton boy-short underwear.
The weight of this year is agony,
tennis shoes and weighted blankets under water.

Huckleberry

Chiara Nicholas

Huckleberry skin brushes, prickly, against bare
chest. I pull you closer to me and ask if you can smell the blood
on my breath or hear the little drummer boy beating against my
breast.

You tell me a heart is just a heart, a mass of crimson pulp,
clogged
gateways, bubbling tide pools of blood and veins like sewer
lines, valves like revolving doors that telephone secrets
and blood like a rumor that eventually pushes its way back
toward the source.

As for my breath, you said, it is the softest
hue of violet and carries with it the smell of summer rain.



Chronic Silence

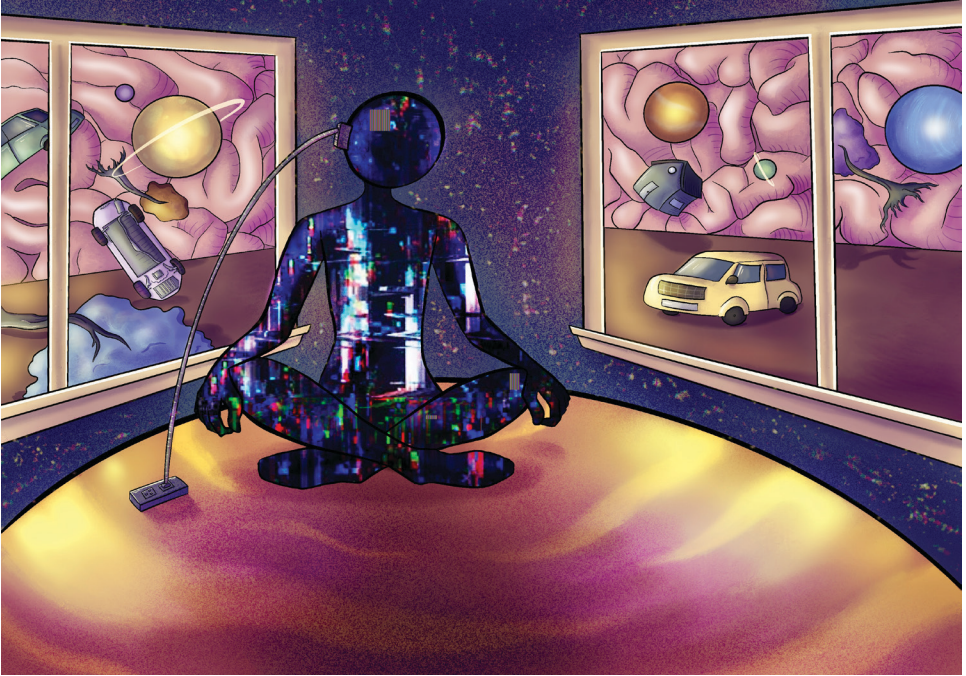
Elizabeth Mock

Ars Poetica: And Here's a Poem

Emma Chapman

And here is a poem
pretending to be a poem.
A poem that hides behind the
curtain, sticking its head out
at the crowd and shrinking in
fear. Here is a poem
that doesn't know how
to be quiet, that doesn't
know how to flow
seamlessly from one
word to the next. Here is
a poem who doesn't
think it has anything
new to say. Here is a poem
who thinks it's pain is
the same as every other
poem, who thinks its
worst moments on Earth
are still not good enough
to be called pain. And
here is a poem
who can't recall it's
happiest moments.
Here is a poem
who doesn't know
how to say things right,
who chokes on it's
words and has never
had the courage to
say the hard things
in life. Here is a poem
who hides in the
white spaces between

words and letters, who
says nothing in
something.
And here's a poem.
And here's a poem. And here's a poem.



The Human Experience

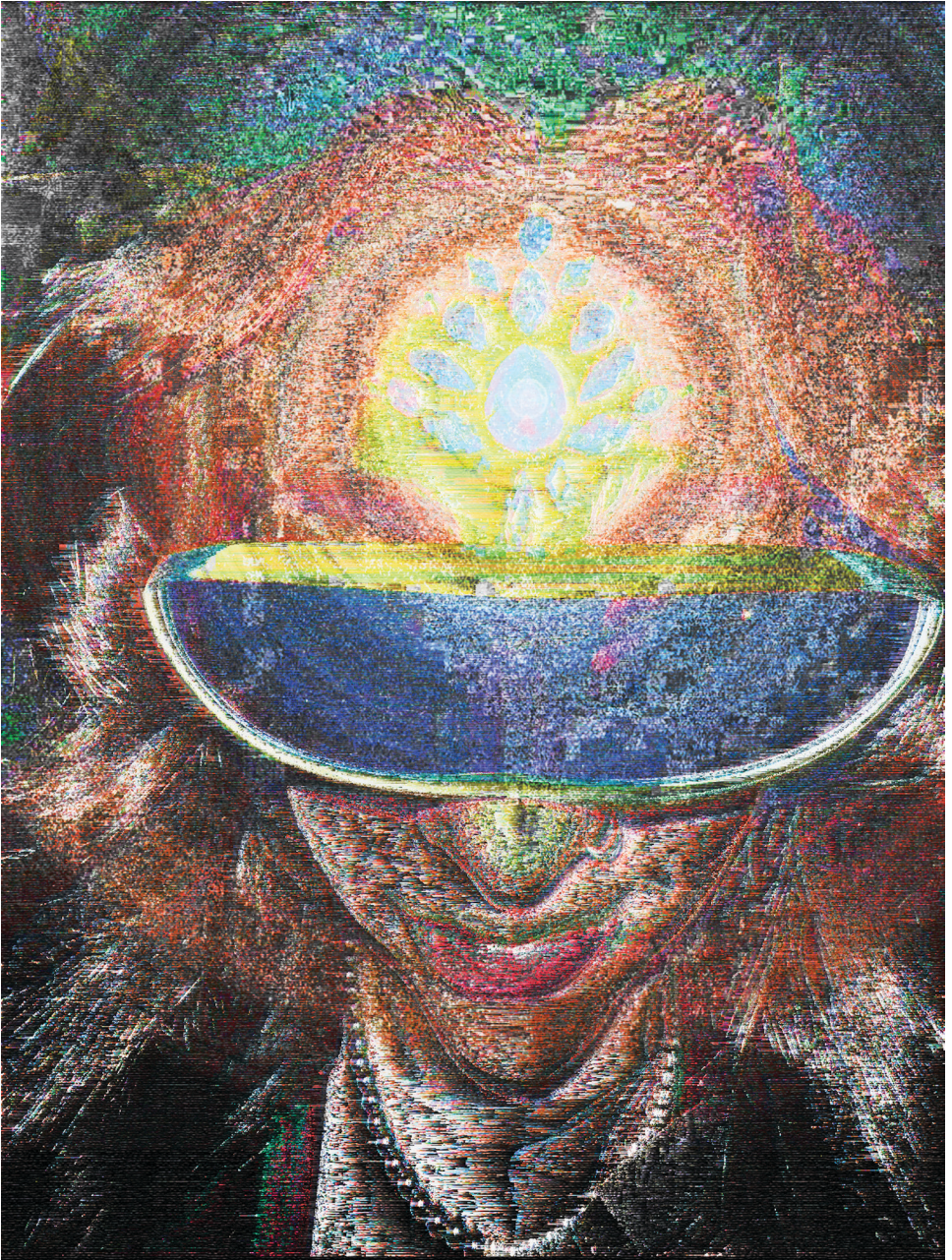
Madison Goetsch

Namesake

Sam Keesling

You are otherworldly,
with your star-studded eyes
and painted body.
Curves made from oil,
dipped in water.
Picturesque, having carved yourself from
marble and stone.
An unwavering pillar.
A permanent fissure
in the moon's sky.
I see your constellation
in the blackness behind my closed eyes.
The Great Bear,
draped in the sapphic songs
of a poet long past.
Your promises teach my feet to dance
a choreography that lay dormant,
reawakened at your touch.
I write odes to your beauty,
the likes of which even Aphrodite
could not replicate.
And yet all the mirrors
in our house are cracked,
held together by the painter's tape
I stole from your art studio.
The canvas of you is soiled,
rough brushstrokes destroying
the brilliance underneath.
And someone took a flame to the edges,
burning the parchment
beyond recognition.
For you are not a god,
or a lavender menace,

you are only a girl
with acrylic paint on your jeans
and clay under your fingernails.
Scars mar your insides,
and my ideas of you lie heavy
on your already trembling shoulders,
asking more of you
than I am worth.



Digital Vision

Jeffrey Staub



The Girl

Jesse Sandoval

Eldest Daughter Syndrome

Holly Heathfield

After diffusing a familial bomb
In the dark I take the long way home
I've been eating glass all evening
Biting my tongue and chewing my inner cheek
A pro bono, unlicensed therapist
Here to lend a listening ear
I can't see shit without the high beams

Thinking of my two daughters who aren't mine
And the sons I've adopted along the way
Secrets spilled on kitchen countertops
They always tell me what they're afraid to say
My back aches from the baggage I carry
And from cracking each vertebrae loudly and often
When I twist my neck, sometimes I think it will snap

I live in a cardboard castle that is quite impressive
From the outside, until you step in
And can see how quickly it would crumble
With a swift shove or a strong gust of wind
Heavy is the head that wears the crown
The golden child wouldn't dare
She's so put together, with tape and glue
She does it all because she cares

A Testament to the Sun

Gabrielle Trembley

Bring me to a field of flowers. Where I can lie there for hours and possibly find the answers. Maybe they won't be there, but that would be okay too. At least I'd get to spend the day with you.

*To the sun,
~love Lola*

My hair is in tangles of disarray. It frames my face so perfectly, even though it looks like a bird is living in it. The bags under my eyes are so pronounced. It looks like I haven't slept in days, and maybe I haven't. To be honest I don't remember. My eyes are beautiful though. They are bright and they are green and they are perhaps my favorite thing about myself. I'm hypnotized by my own stare, and I get what everyone sees now. It's so easy to turn your flaws into superpowers. But lately, more often than not, my eyes are bloodshot. Sometimes from crying, sometimes from getting high, most of the time from both. My nose bleeds every time I cry. I used to try to stop it but now... now I just stare into the mirror and watch as it rolls down my face and chest. I taste the metal and I don't care. It stains my skin and I don't care. I can't feel anything, so I pinch my skin and it stings but I don't care because at least I feel something. I pinch and pull and prod but I don't stop because even though it hurts at least I feel something. I used to love myself, but now when I stand in the mirror I don't recognize the figure staring back at me.

Where did I go?

* * *

Sleeping is easy for the ones who only have one voice in their head, their own voice. People who know who they are deserve to sleep, not the ones with two voices in their head competing over which one of them is the real one.

The ones who deserve to sleep are those who aren't poisoned

with chaos and destruction and controlled by the movement of the wind. Sleep is for the ones who stay grounded, despite the wind.

How strange it feels to live in a world that I have created for myself. I tip-toe the line of reality and dream and see things nobody, not even me, has seen before.

I am not hallucinating. I am seeing what the world looks like when my waking eyes meet my dreamer eyes.

I am not daydreaming. I am walking on the line of two dimensions. In one, I am conscious and aware of the world around me. In the other I am unaware of how blind my conscious is.

* * *

"Play me something," I say, running my fingers through his smooth blond hair.

"Like what?" He turns to me with a small smile on his face.

I smile back and stare into his crystal eyes, "anything."

He sighs and shakes his head, still smiling, as he crosses the room to grab his guitar, "I can never say no to you, not when you look at me like that."

He sits across from me on the edge of the seat. He clears his throat and lowers his head. I watch his body relax as he positions his fingers on the strings. He doesn't look back up, he closes his eyes and there is a moment of silence before he begins to play.

The first chord makes my entire body shiver. I want to close my eyes and focus on the music, but I can't stop watching him. When he plays, it seems as if his guitar is an extension of himself. For him, it's as natural breathing. His eyes remain closed and his head bobs ever so slightly. He is playing for me, but I can tell he's lost all awareness of everything surrounding him. He's in his own world. He's at peace. He is home.

My eyes are watering and I am grinning ear to ear. He plays beautifully, but that's not what's so special about this moment.

When he stops he keeps his head lowered. His arms relax, one resting by his side, the other resting on his guitar. We sit in silence, letting the energy resonate through his small living room.

After a minute, I slowly stand and walk around the coffee table. Gently, I take the guitar from his lap and replace it with me. He wraps his arms lazily around my waist and finally raises his

head to meet my gaze. His expression is different. He's looking at me with complete vulnerability. I stroke his hair and press my lips against his forehead.

"I want you to play me like you play guitar," I breathe into his neck.

His grip tightens and I feel the goosebumps take over his skin.

* * *

It's 3 AM and I am driving on some neighborhood road on the outskirts of town.

It's 3 AM and I'm driving and I don't know where I'm going, but I'm not lost.

It's 3 AM and I am driving, but I don't feel my hands on the wheel.

I know they are. I see them. But I don't...feel them.

I am looking at the lamp posts ahead of me. They line the street as far as I can see, but in my rearview mirror I see nothing but darkness. As I pass under the next one I watch it flicker once, twice, then go out completely.

Coincidence. It's just a coincidence. I whisper this mantra to myself and keep driving, even when the next one goes out. And the next one... And the next one...

My hands are still gripping the steering wheel. I see them.

My knuckles are white from how tight I am holding it, but I still do not feel a thing.

I don't feel anything.

It's 4 AM and I'm on the highway now. I haven't seen one other car so far.

It's 4 AM and all my windows are down and my music is blasting. I close my eyes and see how long I can keep them shut before I get too scared. My blood is racing through my veins like a rollercoaster, my body is shaking, the goosebumps on my skin are permanent, and I still can't feel my hands.

I drift back and forth through all three lanes to the rhythm of the music. My foot gradually presses more and more on the acceleration. 70 ... 80 ... 90 ...

I let off the gas at 98 and pay attention to the way my car slows down. I'm saving 100 for something special.

* * *

He is twirling his hair between his fingers with one hand and holding a cigarette in the other while a little boy is singing about cutting his hair.

Our nose rings interlock while we are kissing and we write our vows on each other's tongues while our fingers draw *I love you's* into our skin.

I fall asleep with him tracing small circles on my chest and dream of him with a man pressing a gun to his heart and he is wondering how it took so long to die.

He scribbles me his secrets with bloodstains in the snow and I clean his wounds and tell him, *you are my magnificent tragedy*.

His soft hands graze my skin and it leaves a glowing trail and he tells me, *I am the concrete and you are the flower*.

* * *

The pink earbuds are still lying on cement as we make our way back to his car. They'd been there for about a week now, I notice them every time. Nobody has picked them up yet, and for some reason I don't want anyone to.

I trail behind him, my feet dragging. He's walking faster than me. He's ready to go. When we get there, he stands next to the driver's side door and faces me. I keep my distance and avoid meeting his eyes, occupying myself by picking off the red chipping paint on his Subaru. His gaze lowers to the pavement and he starts to walk on the yellow line of the parking spot like it's a slackline. When he reaches the end he turns and continues in the other direction. Both times he passes me his shoulder brushes slightly against mine. I close my eyes and focus all of my feeling to only that part of my skin, everything else fades away for a moment as I cherish the small, meaningless touch.

When I feel his gaze on me I open my eyes. He runs his fingers through his dark hair, which is so much longer now compared to when we met two years ago. In this moment, I want nothing more than to play with his hair one last time. I want to ruffle it up and then put it all back into place, just how he likes it. He wears a hat almost every day and I've threatened to burn them all multiple times if he didn't stop. I'd tell him that it's sinful to hide such beautiful curls and it's not fair to me to cover them all the time, but he never listened to me, and his hats remain unscorched.

This time he didn't wear a hat, and I wonder if he did it on

purpose.

He squints up at the sun and bites his lip, "I should get going."

He hops into his car and starts the engine without another word and I stare at him through the open window.

"Drake..."

He looks at me and flashes a forced smile, "hey," he reaches his hand out and I take it all too eagerly. Both of our hands are clammy, both of our faces solemn. He squeezes it tight and for a split second he looks at me the way he used to, "your eyes are so beautiful."

With that, he lets go and drives off. And that's it.

* * *

I know I'm not okay when I don't want to shower. And right now, I'm not okay. If I were okay, I would be rushing to get under the soothing water and let it wash the grease and sweat and stink and mistakes. I'm dirty and guilt-ridden, and I'm not showering. I'm sitting on my floor, staring at the bathroom door that's opened just a crack, marinating in the unbearable smell sinking further into my skin. I hate being dirty. I hate feeling dirty. But I'm not showering, and now I hate myself.

My body is curled up in a ball, head buried, muscles tense. I squeeze everything together, trying to take up as little space in the world as possible. Every once in a while, I peer up to look at the door once again. I try to picture myself standing up, walking through that door, turning the faucet on, stripping myself from the clothes that now hold a memory, and stepping into the glorious hot water that would rain down on me and wash everything down the drain like it never even happened.

But I can't do it. My body... it's too heavy. I have never been so aware of the earth's gravity holding me down as much as I do now. It's so strong, relentless. I remember that feeling, it seems so long ago that I've felt like that, but it hasn't been that long. Not nearly as long as it feels like it has.

Gravity has won. I'm laying on my side now. I don't know how I got here. I stare at that goddamn door, which has reconfigured itself into a face. The face is unfamiliar, but it's laughing at me. I squeeze my eyes shut but I can still hear the laughing. It's getting louder and louder and louder and my ears start to ring and just before my mind goes blank I hear a voice whisper, *Is it quite*

possible that while you are on the quest of finding your deeper meaning in life, you are poisoning everyone you touch?

* * *

He opens the door and invites a gust of wind in with him. It stings my skin and my entire body shakes. The breeze is too bitter for a night in July.

Everyone shouts his name like he's a celebrity making his first appearance on stage. I don't understand why until he empties the contents of his backpack on the kitchen counter. A twelve pack of twisted teas, two fifths of vodka (strawberry and cherry flavored), tequila, fireball, sangria, a little bit of everything. Our friends go to him and grab what they want. They thank him before returning to whatever they were doing before, like they already forgot he was there.

I still haven't moved from my cozy spot on the couch, curled up cradling my bottle of pink wine. His name is Justin. I didn't shout his name like the others did because I hadn't known it at the time. I didn't know him yet.

I sip my wine straight from the bottle and catch him smiling at me. I'm not one to notice a person's teeth, let alone remember them, but his are annoyingly perfect to ever forget. They glimmer with his eyes and make it impossible to break his gaze. Now he's walking toward me, my body is tingling, and I'm looking at him hoping there's something behind that pretty face. Something meaningful to latch on to.

"Do you always drink your wine like that?"

"I'm not a wine glass kind of girl. Too many refills,"

He laughs at that and my cheeks turn pink as I smirk.

The entire couch is empty, but he chooses the cushion right next to me, making sure there is no space between us.

"Do you like vodka?"

I don't, but it takes him less than a minute to convince me to take a shot, "I'm a total lightweight, so this will either be the best night of my life or the last night I ever drink again."

He takes a step closer to me and puts his hand on my shoulder, "don't worry, I'll take care of you no matter what happens."

We cheers and tilt our heads back. The liquor burns my throat and my face cringes uncontrollably. I slam the glass down, and

hang my head as I rest my hands on my knees. He laughs again and crouches down to look at my face. His eyes are perhaps the only ones I trust. I look at him and I know I'm going to be okay, he's going to take care of me.

We walked around the block and he held my hand to stabilize me. He told me he was Native American, he told me he was dyslexic, he told me about his parents divorce and how much he loves his mom, he told me about the girl who broke his heart. I will never forget feeling his grip tighten after each secret he spilled and all I wanted was to give him everything he deserves.

We walk back to the house, everyone was already asleep. So we pick a couch to curl up on. I'd never met a body that fit with mine so perfectly, effortlessly. On a couch so small, neither of us are uncomfortable. We aren't tired, too high on the newness of us. So we talk, his hand travels around my body, stroking my hair, then my arm, the palm of my hand. His touch makes my body shiver, even my insides shiver but I stay still, wishing he would never stop.

His hand makes its way up to my face, letting the backs of his fingers slide down my cheek. I look into his eyes gleaming at me and through them I can see the walls inside of him breaking down, surrendering to me. His lips peel apart, then seal shut again. He gnaws on his lower lip and my thumb touches his scratchy chin. He lets me trace his lips with my thumb and gently tug on his bottom lip, setting it free from his teeth.

"Say it,"

"I... it... it feels like I already know you... somehow..." His voice quivers as he whispers the words. Words that are just another way of saying, *I think I'm falling in love with you.*

I bite my lip, trying to contain my wide smile, "I know exactly what you mean."

He touches the crinkles at the corner of my eyes and leans his head against mine. Our lips are inches from one another, begging to meet. In any other situation, I wouldn't hesitate. But this feels different. Nothing has ever felt so right, so special. That's why I can't let this happen yet. So I turn away just before our lips meet and plant a kiss on his cheek. He laughs, but I don't stop there. I push his head up so his neck is exposed and plant small, wet, delicate kisses. My teeth find his ear and his breathing changes. He grips my hair and pulls me to look at him. He stares into my eyes. For so long. I think he's looking for something.

Maybe my soul. I can tell I'm giving him everything he wants.

This time it's me who surrenders. Our lips finally meet and my entire body goes numb. Except for my lips... they are on fire.

I hear the voice inside my head whisper, you're letting it happen again.

* * *

This is the first time I've ever closed my blinds on a sunny day. And it feels good. The sun was annoying me for some reason. Her light is so bright that it's burning my eyes and now she's making my eyes water and I can't take her anymore.

I love the sun, she gives me life, she fuels me. But now she's being a nag. I've already tried walking out to greet her. But she shined her light at me the same way she is now and I feel even worse because she's not working. The sun usually lifts my spirits and reminds me that everything will be okay. I've always trusted the sun, she's been there for me through it all. Which is why I don't understand how she's not working with me now. She won't stop her taunting. I don't want to keep my blinds closed forever. I want to want the sun, and I want her to want me back. But right now, the darkness is bringing me peace and I don't like it. It should be her.

The chirp of a chickadee from outside gently wakes me up from a sleep I must've fallen into. He pauses a few seconds before singing his song once again. He repeats it a few more times before another chickadee starts to sing with him. Their chirps overlap each other, singing their own little duet.

Chicka-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee.

Chicka-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee.

I'm not a bird lover, but I love chickadees because they're named after their call and they bring back memories of my mom and I singing with them. I open part of the blind to look for them but instead I am graced with the radiant glow of the sun in her golden hour. My eyes aren't burning or watering. She's not nagging, she's not taunting. She's calming me. Now I can see the chickadees chasing each other in the sky while they sing and I can hear the sun saying, *work with me.*

* * *

I am alone on my back porch lighting a joint and staring into the pouring rain. As soon as the smoke hits my lungs I am hit with the memory of him. Specifically his laugh. Out of all the times he has crossed my mind, this is the first time I have thought about his laugh. I wonder why that is, it is one of my many favorite things about him. I can hear it in the center of my brain, and it triggers a ripple effect of all the memories I have of him. The waves travel until they crash into the inside of my skull with a satisfying pulse.

My whole head is now taken over by him, refusing to think about anything else. His hair, the dreads hiding his face. When I played with it my fingers would be sticky from the gel and the grime. But I didn't care. We were in love.

I think ...

I'm remembering his solemn face. How when we were in public, he would scan everyone up and down, silently telling them don't fuck with me, and especially don't fuck with my girl. But when he opened his mouth he radiated joy and happiness, speaking friendly as can be, because he is.

I think ...

I'm remembering the look he would give me when he thought I was about to lie. But I never lied to him. At least not about my feelings.

I think ...

I remember his eyes, how they sparkled as he fell in love with me. Deeply in love with me. He memorized me: the curves, the wrinkles, the stretch lines, a freckle here, a scar there. I would watch him materialize and enter my body through my pupils. I would feel him poke and prod as he got to know my soul, earning her trust. He stood beside me but lived in my soul.

Until he didn't.

I remember our kisses, how mystical they were. They weren't sparks. They were a blazing fire. Our lips, they moved as one, and each touch would send feverish shivers down every inch of my body and I would tell him I'm all yours, you can have me. I want you to have me.

And I meant it.

Until I didn't. I'm remembering the feeling of our bodies igniting each other with flames that we could not control and we would tell each other I'm so in love with you. I'm so in love with you. I'm so in love with you.

And we meant it
Until we didn't.

My body is so hot that I don't feel the sting of the end of the joint burning my two fingers. If he were with me right now, I would be watching him ash it with his tongue without even the slightest flinch, and I would be wondering, *just when I thought he couldn't get any more attractive ... How on earth can one person be this attractive? And why did he choose me?*

I don't wonder about that anymore. Because he didn't choose me. He's just another guy that I fell in love with and then lost ...

I'm choiceless.

I'm alone.

The sounds of the raindrops hitting the earth are calling for me. They are pulling my body beneath them so they can taste my flesh and so I can feel not alone. I can sense Mother Nature's vibrational energy and the life she is giving to the plants, the trees, the leaves, the grass, the creek, all of it, even me. The rain sings to me, *let us free you.*

* * *

This time, he saw me first. This time, I felt his gaze before I saw him. This time, I didn't feel the blood drain from my body, in fact, I didn't feel anything. This time, I smirked. I didn't want to go on this walk, I thought I was the one who forced myself. I should've known the sun was playing tricks on me again.

We watch each other walk down the perpendicular sidewalks towards each other. If only I were 20 feet closer, we would meet each other in the center where our sidewalks collide. If only I were 20 feet closer, he would be able to see my eyes, how they've changed. But that's not supposed to happen yet. In this moment, we are both exactly where we are supposed to be.

His gaze lingers longer than I expect. I can't imagine what his poor brain is going through. What he must miss ... or not miss. What he must regret, whether it be leaving me or ever meeting me. What he must feel. I wonder about his heartbeat. Is it racing? Is it plummeting? Is it beating so loud that he can hear and feel it in his head?

I can almost feel our brains simultaneously turning like flip books, replaying every memory we have of each other as we watch.

The memories fly behind my eyes. The way he would pull me closer to him in his sleep.

The way he would scratch my back while we did homework together. Or how he played with my hair while I told him about my day. And when he brought me pizza and ice cream whenever I had a bad day. He did so many lovely things, enough that make it almost impossible to be angry at him. But I learned how to push the good memories back and replace them with the memories where he showed me who he really is.

Like when he started canceling our plans with bullshit excuses, then later when he didn't even bother to make any excuse at all. At the time, I couldn't bring myself to believe that he wasn't interested in me anymore. I wasn't prepared, he didn't prepare me to be hurt by him. I was too infatuated, and he was too good at pretending to be.

I didn't want to go on this walk, but I needed to see him. Because seeing him makes me realize how much stronger I am now.

* * *

I'm driving with the sunrise. And the sun is reminding me of the beauty that surrounds me—surrounds us—every single day; something that I have forgotten about for far too long. In front of me the sky is a concoction of light blue and orange and yellow. Behind me I see deep blues and purples fading into one other. Transitioning from night to day, from black to blue, from dark to light, from sad to happy.

The sun, oh the sun, how I cherish her. She shines with an orange vibrance that only she can produce. Nothing, not even the greatest photographer or painter could ever mimic. That orange is hers. It is only her vibrance, only her beauty, that can tell me that everything is going to be okay. She is the only one I trust.

Her light bounces off buildings and street signs. She peeks through the leafless trees. She glares off the windshield of the car behind me who's been riding my ass. But her glare turns into a glow and I know she is telling me that it is okay. Don't get upset, it's not worth it. She's right, she always is.

The road curves and before me appears the city skyline, the most perfect view. Small but mighty, just like me. The buildings

look small now, but soon I will be among them and they will not be so small. They will rise above me and encapsulate me, but the sun will still be there for me, her light bouncing off the windows and I will be okay.

The sun, she dances with me to the beat of my music. With the sun and my music I am unstoppable. They are the perfect pairing. And when they are with me together I can do anything. Anything I want.

I'm listening, Sun. I'm listening and I'm trying. I know you know that, but do you know that it's all because of you?

Contributors

EMMA CHAPMAN is a junior writing major from Middleville, Michigan. Through her work she seeks to explore topics such as gender, age, family relationships, love, and mental illness, hoping to connect with others through her words.

LIV CHOW is a photography major graduating in 2023 who is from Bloomfield, MI and loves taking photographs around campus at Grand Valley, highlighting the beautiful nature and architecture.

KEEGAN COLCLEASURE is a GVSU student currently pursuing degrees in English and Secondary Education. He has had a passion for writing for as long as he can remember and is constantly seeking to produce literary works to be enjoyed by his peers.

BRIANNA DELANGE is an English and Writing double major at Grand Valley. Outside of photography, she enjoys embroidery, gaming, and dance. She can often be found talking about animation to anyone who will listen. In the future, she hopes to publish fiction and work as a copy editor.

ANNA EVANGELISTA just graduated in April 2022 with a BA in Writing and a minor in Spanish. Her main inspiration for writing poetry comes from nature and the wonder of the mind interacting with the world.

MADISON GOETSCH is a sophomore Illustration major and Writing minor. She mainly works digitally and enjoys drawing anything with characters, with much of her art containing narrative or psychological themes. Madison has had art displayed in five art shows and was a finalist in an art competition back home in Illinois. She would like to thank her beautiful dog, Belle, for being her biggest motivator.

MARGIE GRIGGS is a printmaker who strives to understand the natural world through her experiences and artwork. She attempts to uncover the mysteries of the outdoors by creating moments she has during her observations.

OLIVIA HAMMELEF is a Sophomore at GVSU, and is majoring in Photography. Her preferred style is nature and wildlife photography, but she enjoys all forms of the craft, as long as creating art is involved.

HOLLY HEATHFIELD is a senior studying Advertising and Public Relations with a deep appreciation for museums, concerts, literature, and various other forms of artistic escapism.

ISAAC HAVEN is a film and video major at GVSU. He is a storyteller who likes using words, pictures, and sounds to bring the worlds in his head to life. He likes video games, animals, and little things.

KATHERINE HEIL is a GVSU student with a love for any sort of poetry. Alongside writing both poetry and fiction, she enjoys drawing, learning odd and useless facts, and listening to music at nearly every waking moment. Currently, she is working her way through Agatha Christie's Poirot novels.

Hailing from southeast Michigan, **JACKSON HICKS** is a writer and poet, having written over a dozen works since 2017. Currently studying English and Writing at Grand Valley State University, he hopes to write stories about the human experience through the lenses of complex characters in complex times.

ESTHER JOY is a storyteller. Through writing and art, she tells poetic, character-driven stories that reflect the joy found in this world and beyond. Currently, her hair is periwinkle, but usually, it's one of any number of pinks: bubblegum, mauve, magenta, blush, rose, and coral, just to name a few.

SAM KEESLING is a senior at GVSU double majoring in Writing and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Her interests include traveling, reading, knitting, and writing the stories that live rent-free in her head.

AUDREY KELLY is a storyteller with a passion for web design and user experience. When she's not working toward her BA in Writing with a minor in Digital Studies, you can probably find her reading sci-fi or going on adventures with her best friends.

CASSIE KREFT is a recent graduate who's now entering the world of advertising and digital studies. Cassie lives through stories, specifically the ones that are too wacky to understand yet have the deepest meanings. That's mainly what Cassie finds poetry to be, the art of putting together scattered words.

SARAH KRISHEF is a Film and Video and Writing major. Growing up Jewish in a small city, she sought to write in order to share her experiences with other people. She hopes to one day pursue her passions and express herself further in the animated television industry.

ELIZABETH MOCK is a multidisciplinary creative who graduated from Grand Valley State University's illustration program in April 2022. When she is not indulging in her passions of photography, graphic design, and looping animation, she spends a lot of her time in the official Adobe Creative Career Discord server. Elizabeth currently serves there as a community manager helping server members elevate their careers through mentorship and connection.

CHIARA NICHOLAS is a senior at GVSU double majoring in Writing and Psychology. She loves writing poetry and plays and hopes to one day see one of those plays on stage. At GVSU, she is a writing consultant, President of Anchored in Poetry, and a writer for the InWriting Newsletter.

JESSE SANDOVAL is a photographer born and raised in Los Angeles. An introvert by nature, Sandoval takes the thoughts from his head and visualizes them through photography. Inspired by his life experiences and outlook on the world, Sandoval intertwines beauty and melancholy, creating dream-like fragments of reality.

HAYLEE SEEFELD is an author, artist, and a 2022 graduate of GVSU with a degree in writing. In her free time, she enjoys drawing, painting, reading, embroidery, cosplay, and, of course, writing. Her favorite genres include fantasy, realism, and horror, which she loves to blend together in her work. She is currently working on her first novel and hopes to publish more of her pieces in the near future!

MADISON SMITH is a fourth year biochemistry major student working on a minor in writing. She enjoys writing short stories, reading, watching comedies and crime shows, and working on any of her current projects. She is very excited to have this story be her first publication!

KELLEY SOMMERS returned to Grand Valley in the fall of 2020 to pursue a BA in English literature and language, with a minor in Writing. Previously, she spent 9 beautiful and exhausting years running a coffee shop with her father. Kelley hopes to go to grad school for Irish Studies and finally finish that novel that's been brewing on her computer.

JEFFREY STAUB is a junior Film and Video major exploring new art techniques such as data moshing and pixel sorting. He finds the best way to maximize creativity is to dabble in multiple art forms—from drawing and photo manipulation, to film and coding.

GABRIELLE TREMBLEY is a senior writing major and applied linguistics minor. Gabi has always recognized and appreciated the power of language; and hopes that her writing has the power to impact people in similar ways that it has done for her. She is from Davison, Michigan, and plans to someday move to the east coast to pursue her writing career.

